

## Overview

Email is enormously useful in our working life, but it can be a hindrance, or even a liability. This guide provides advice on avoiding common problems.

Pending publication of guidelines from the University's Human Resources Section, this guide covers personal and institutional topics, as well as more practical email advice.

## Contents

### General points

Personal communications	2
Some advantages of using email	2
Some disadvantages	2
Freedom of speech	2
Privacy	2

### Email and your personal life at work

Advice on receiving email	3
Sending email:	
Empathy	3
Anger	4
Indiscretion	4
Good ideas: your private life and University email	5

### Efficient use

Good habits	5
Replying to email	5
Sending	6
Composing	6
Outlook's Recall facility	7
Mailstore management: taking care of your allocation	7
Using a Signature	7
Using an "Out of Office" automatic reply	7

### Your responsibilities

#### when using your University email address

Security	8
Legal issues	9
Using "disclaimers"	9

*Symbols used in  
this document*



*Recommended*



*Consider this  
point carefully*



*Don't do this*



*Extra tips for  
Outlook users*

## Personal communications

All communications between staff should be *polite* and *well considered*. This is especially true when sending email messages, where we do not have the benefits of facial expression and voice intonation to provide normal human feedback.

Email can cause misunderstandings; it can encourage unpleasantness to thrive. Direct personal contact, on the other hand, can de-fuse a confrontation, or soften a blow. Here's a good thought from a colleague:

*"We cannot expect to communicate well via email if we forget how to communicate with each other face to face."*

### Some advantages of email

The advantages are not always obvious:

- Email is easy, and it reaches the other side of the world almost as fast as the other side of the office.
- It is "asynchronous", i.e. two or more people do not have to be in the same place at the same time in order to have productive exchanges.
- It can encourage better expression of thoughts and intentions than can be the case with verbal communications.
- You can deal with several tasks almost simultaneously. Physically meeting people to deal with the same tasks might take half the day — "small talk" is not a feature of email [at work].
- There is a permanent record of exchanges, which is useful for reviewing progress, recording intricate details, etc.

### Some disadvantages

- Email does not permit the kind of fertile exchanges that personal meetings produce: there are times when you do need to meet people and talk.
- There can be an excess of unnecessary – or at least non-productive – email (*to* you, or *from* you!).
- Email is not paper: nobody is ever going to burn the evidence. An indiscreet email can come back one day and "bite" you. Moreover email can be forwarded *anywhere, by anyone*, getting ever more out of your own control. See *Privacy*, below.

### Freedom of speech

This is a University: you are not [yet] required to act rigidly within "corporate rules".

On the other hand, this is a University: you are expected to show proper respect for your colleagues, for the institution which we all serve, and for the rules of decent, civilized, educated behaviour.

Personal freedoms notwithstanding, the University *will* discipline staff who overstep the mark. Don't forget that the University owns the equipment, and the @newcastle address that you are using.

### Privacy

Email is fairly secure from prying eyes, but there is a saying (explained later in this document):

*"Only send email messages that you don't mind the whole world reading".*

Does anyone monitor your email at the University? The answer is **No** ... unless there has been an explicit request from "The Authorities", for example in a potentially criminal case.

Also remember that the University may be required to disclose email messages under the Freedom of Information Act, or RIPA (Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act) or other legislation.

## Email and your personal life at work

### Receiving

It is easier to *receive* than to *send*! So we start with these points ...



Bearing in mind all that is said below: ***be tolerant of others' mistakes.***



If an email causes you concern or offence, ***first*** consider the person who sent it: perhaps their usual mode of verbal expression leads to emails which seem abrupt or even rude.

Offence is very rarely intended: use the telephone and ask politely for more information. It's always more effective to deal *in person* with matters of potential disagreement.



Also bear in mind that English (and its usage) may not be the native language of the sender. For example many Europeans speak perfect English, but they may sometimes use it in an abrupt way.



If an email that you receive is potentially contentious or offensive, then ***pause*** and consider how best to deal with it, before you reply.

If offence has been caused, and resolution seems unlikely, then contact your "line manager" (or equivalent): she or he will bring about a more positive discussion.



If you are the recipient of abusive or harassing email from outside your own department, forward ***the whole message*** to the University "Postmaster" (ISS's mail team) via [Helpdesk@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Helpdesk@ncl.ac.uk)

Do not delete the message until it has been dealt with. Steps will be taken to trace and deal with the offender, whether inside or outside the University.



Control the spam that you receive: see <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/iss/email/spamaction.html>

### Sending

#### Empathy



In live discussion we modify our *language* and our *verbal tone* to suit the people we are addressing: it's difficult to do this in email.



In some cases it's useful to put yourself in the place of the person who will be reading your message, and to ask yourself "*How would I interpret this wording?*".



Never say anything in email which you would not be prepared to say in a room full of people.

Also remember: in email it's very easy to forward one person's message to another person ... ***or to an entire group.*** This is one of the great *benefits* of email, but it can also act to your disadvantage: your email can be forwarded anywhere.



Offensive mail: what do ***you*** call offensive? Everyone has different sensitivities: remember this when phrasing a message, *especially* when sending to a group of people or to an email list. "Colourful language" should never be used.



When appropriate, a "smiley" can be useful. Consider the difference:

I won't let you get away with that.

I won't let you get away with that. :-)

## Anger



**Never** send an email message when you are angry (or otherwise upset).

Quite apart from the effect you will have on your recipient(s), **you yourself** will suffer unnecessary anguish when your temper has cooled.



Once you have sent a message you cannot stop it or change it.

Outlook has a Recall facility: this is not intended to save you from embarrassment, and it will not work for that purpose! (See page 7.)



If you can barely resist sending an email when hot-headed, it's a very good idea to **send it to yourself**. Then see *Empathy*, above. It can be surprising to see how different an email looks when it appears in your Inbox, in contrast to when you were typing it.



If an argument develops when using email, **learn to detect the signs**, then go and speak to your colleague (or telephone them) instead of escalating the problem via email.



The same applies if you have something unpleasant to say (for example correcting a colleague in some way, or conveying bad news).

## Indiscretion



Check your To: field! Be extra careful if you rely upon Outlook's *auto-complete* feature.

Check your CC: field! You may make an aside to a colleague, which you had not intended an original recipient to see.



Consider who really needs to receive an email. Don't CC: people just because it's so easy to do so.

This applies especially to people outside your department if you are discussing internal matters.



Stop and think: before forwarding a message to a third party: would the sender mind you forwarding this message? Are there details that you should cut out, before forwarding?



Only send a message to an email list if it is appropriate for that list: you need to be aware of the stated purpose of the list, and also of the *entire membership* of the list.



If sending a message to a new contact **double-check** the email address: the person you know as Mary Smith may be A.M.C.Smith@ncl.ac.uk, whilst the Mary.Smith@ncl.ac.uk that you see in the email directory is a different person: check the School, etc. (<https://cama.ncl.ac.uk/>)



Do not imply co-signatories (i.e. do not attach the names of colleagues): when you send an email message **you are speaking for yourself**. See also *Responsible Use* on page 8.



**Be considerate** about using BCC at work. Although BCC is often useful, it can be annoying to receive a message (for example about a forthcoming meeting) and not know who your co-recipients are. On the other hand a *good* case for using BCC might be a student counsellor emailing all the people on her case list, thus retaining confidentiality. Wikipedia discusses BCC usefully:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/blind\\_carbon\\_copy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/blind_carbon_copy)



Spamming! Do not "broadcast" email messages.

The University **disapproves strongly** of users sending unsolicited email to others, no matter what the "Good Cause" might be (whether it is private **or academic**). Consult ISS if you think you have a good case for mass-mailing.

## Good ideas: your private life



Separate your private life from your work life: own a private mail address outside work.

There are two reasons: firstly, home is home and work is work; secondly, your `newcastle.ac.uk` account actually belongs to the University: do not *depend* upon this email address for *all* personal email. (The *Conditions of Use* say “Limited personal use is tolerated”.)



If you check your University mail from home, *be careful*: do not spoil your weekend (*and that of your family!*) by getting worked up about office issues when you’re at home.



If there are contentious issues afoot at work, then **do not** check your University email from home!



For your main *private* email address it’s a good idea to use an independent email service (Hotmail, Yahoo, Gmail, etc.). If you use only the one provided by your ISP then when you change your ISP you will have to tell all your contacts that your email address has changed.

## Efficient use

### Good habits



Check your mail regularly.

Some people choose to check mail only twice a day; others “live inside” email. The circumstances of your own job dictate a wise compromise.



Do not be driven by email!



For *some* Outlook users it might be a good idea to turn **off** all ‘New Message’ alerts:

Tools – Options – Email Options – Advanced Email Options ...



Checking a message doesn’t mean you *have* to reply to it (but see *Respond!* below).

Replying instantly can seriously affect your working day: nothing generates email like email.



Aim at always having a fairly empty Inbox. Use folders, and use filters (“Rules” in Outlook) to file messages into folders *as they arrive*.

(In Outlook, the number of unread messages is displayed beside a folder’s name in the Folder List: you can easily tell when new mail has been delivered.)



If an empty Inbox is beyond you, use Outlook’s “flag” feature to prevent you forgetting messages; especially useful is the ability to set a reminder on a message (*right-click* the flag box for the message).



Sent Items in Outlook keeps everything you ever sent: useful – but Remove attachments from the messages you sent to avoid wasting your mailstore (right-click the attachment icon).

The proper place to store attachments is your networked filestore, not your mailstore.

## Replying



### *Respond!*

If a message is requesting action on your part **respond promptly**. Not replying to such messages is *discourteous* and may be confusing to the sender.

If you have no time to answer properly, just say “OK – I’ll reply soon”. This at least shows that you are aware of the message. It’s easy to forget a message altogether if you receive more than a few per day.



Outlook provides the facility to “flag” messages or even to add an automatic reminder (right-click the message in the index, or click the flag in the message’s toolbar).

▽ **Thanks** (... but don't go overboard)  
 Jim may only have been doing his job, but he will appreciate knowing that the advice he gave has fixed your problem. However don't start email tennis: "Thanks for that!" "No problem." "Cheers!" "Yes - fine - any time..." Email is intended to improve communication, not clog it up.

▽ **Reply to All?**  
 Only use **Reply to All** if your answer has some effect on **all** the Recipients.  
 To simplify things, you can use **Reply to All** and then remove the Recipients who don't need to continue in the exchange.

### Replying: including content

There are two options when replying to a message:

1. You can leave the entire old message appended to your reply.

Outlook encourages this, but it is often **annoying, confusing** and it is **wasteful** of mailstore.

It's not unusual to see: "Yep - I'll be there" – followed by the entire meeting agenda, notes, and preceding mail exchanges leading up to the meeting. (And often "Reply to All" has been used as well!!)

It must be admitted that appending replied-to messages can be useful, to store a complete record. However it's wasteful when you keep all 14 messages (just in case you missed a bit), *each one of which* has the whole exchange so far.

2. The "correct" way to reply to email is to be selective in the parts of a message that you reproduce, and to interleave your answer point by point. It is easy to do this with all mail programs, and it's one of the things that makes email so powerful.

There is **much** controversy about "top" and "bottom posting": if you are interested, see

<http://tinyurl.com/37maag>

### Sending

↑↑↑ Make sure that the Subject field of your message is meaningful. "Help wanted" for example, is useless; contrast with "Question about footers in Word".

STOP Do not use Delivery or Read Receipts (in New Message, Options).

(1) "Delivery" is certain at the University: you don't need confirmation!

(2) A "Read Receipt" is meaningless: the recipient may have previewed your message while reviewing their Inbox, and Outlook counts this as "read".

### Composing messages

↑↑↑ Identify your points clearly and provide white space — that is, insert blank lines between your different points.

↑↑↑ Be brief. Readers skim over long, dense messages.

↑↑↑ Would you yourself understand the points you wish to make? If it's an important message *send it to yourself first*: it will read differently, in your Inbox, to when you are writing it.

▽ Email is not texting. There are no rules to say you shouldn't send a message consisting of  
*hi, can u tell me wot ths wks essay is agn plz? chz*

This does no harm ... except to your reputation in the mind of the recipient.



Recipients should not have to guess what you are trying to say: grammar and punctuation are important. Use proper capitalization and spell-check your text when appropriate.



To spell-check in Outlook: select all text in message, press F7.



Do not use **Rich Text**, **HTML** format, **backgrounds**, or other “visual enhancements”.

- These greatly increase the size of messages (and your mailstore consumption);
- they will be displayed wrongly for people who don’t use MS Outlook;
- they may make a message unreadable for people who have a visual impairment.



### Recall facility

Outlook has a Recall facility: Actions when you open a sent message in Sent Items. Naturally, *this only works for Outlook Exchange users who are addressing other Outlook Exchange users* (this is now over 90% of the University’s population, but a significant number of staff do not use Exchange).

Recall is intended for correcting or improving the details in a business message, so that a more accurate record is in the mail system; it replaces the message previously sent, and thus cuts down on mail volume. Usually, most recipients will already have seen the first version.

## Mailstore management

**Delete** unwanted messages. Your mail storage is limited: if you do not keep it tidy, new messages will eventually be refused delivery.



In Outlook, Deleted Items will stay there forever unless you explicitly Empty Deleted Items (right-click the folder). You can opt to *empty it automatically* by using Tools – Options – Other

In an emergency you can recover deleted items up to about one week old: with Deleted Items selected, click Tools then Recover Deleted Items



Messages take up relatively little space: it is **attachments** which are the problem! Always move attachments that you wish to keep from your mailstore to your filestore.



If you wish to **keep a message**, but **remove** the attached file: right-click the attachment’s icon.



Attachments can lie forgotten in Deleted Items and Sent Items.

## Signatures

See also Disclaimers on page 9



**Nobody** needs a 12-line signature! Halve the number of lines by using both ends:

**Lucy Lantern**  
Senior Lecturer  
L.E.Lantern@newcastle.ac.uk  
+44 191 222 9999  
<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/sep/lel/>

**School of Engineering Philosophy**  
Collingwood Building  
Newcastle University  
Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU

The email address is included because Outlook Exchange – annoyingly – only uses your “Display Name” (e.g. “Lucy Lantern” — which is not an Internet email address) when messages are forwarded or otherwise included in mail transactions: this leaves indirect recipients at a loss for your address.



Most mail programs allow you to use a signature only when needed.



In Outlook you can define as many different signatures as you want (Tools – Options – Mail Format). You can use these as “rubber stamp text”, such as “Thank you for your application ...” You can insert as many as you wish, and edit them when inserted.



### “Out of Office” message

Exchange provides an easy-to-use Out of Office facility: Tools – Out of Office Assistant.

This is extremely useful for your colleagues: in the OoO message, say when you’re back at work, and also say who may be contacted in your absence.

Keep the message to a simple statement: you never know *who* is going to send you a message while you are away, and thus receive your “humorous” OoO reply.

A downside of OoO messages is that they can confirm to a “spammer” that your email address does exist. Given the strength of the anti-spam measures at the University, this risk is usually outweighed by the usefulness of OoO to your colleagues.

It’s possible for your email to be forwarded to, or delegated to, someone else, but ISS strongly recommends that ***you do not do this*** for your personal account. *You* may not mind others reading your email, but the people who are mailing you do not know that their messages will be read by another person. Instead, consider using a ‘role account’ ...

### “Role” accounts

ISS provides role accounts for projects, group work, or specific roles in a School. This not only permits several individuals to share the work communally, but it ensures that if you are away on holiday or you fall ill, this work continues (and no need for an OoO message).

A role account also permits delegation in Outlook with no risk of infringing personal privacy (see above). See Tools–Options–Delegates — or ask your Departmental Computing Officer for advice.

## Responsible Use

See also the pink sheet *Go1 Responsible Use*, which links to the University’s *Statement on Internet Use*.

### Security



***Protect your password!*** If somebody else discovers your password, messages could be sent which will be signed by *you*. Your password is your responsibility!



If using a public computer (such as in an Internet café) restart it after you’ve finished; this should clear out the caches on the computer.



Email is no more secure than postal mail (or Fax, or the telephone):

- (a) It is not safe from criminal activity.
- (b) It may be monitored if an offence is suspected.
- (c) System administrators may see the contents of messages in the course of their work.

## Legal issues



Email sent from your University account is similar to a letter on official University paper: do not say anything that might bring discredit to the University, or (unless you are authorised) anything which might imply a legal obligation.

If expressing personal opinions in public forums, add appropriate disclaimers. Multiple signatures come in useful for this: for example you might keep one which states:

*“This email is sent in a personal capacity and is not on behalf of Newcastle University”.*



The laws of the land relating to written communication apply equally to email, for example those relating to defamation, copyright, plagiarism, obscenity, misrepresentation, freedom of information, wrongful discrimination, harassment, etc.



If you forward another person’s message, you may delete or re-word parts for brevity or clarity: *you must make it perfectly clear* where you have done this.



Don’t try to pretend to be someone else when sending mail, for example by using someone else’s account. For the same reason, protect your passwords.

Although it is relatively easy to “spoof” email, it is equally easy for network managers to trace a message to its real source: do not be tempted to “play a joke”, because it will not be interpreted as such.



When participating in non-work forums, ***you must not*** use your `newcastle.ac.uk` address.

## “Disclaimers”



Some mail users add long legalistic “disclaimers” to their messages, possibly advised by their institution. It’s not uncommon for such disclaimers to be several times longer than the message itself. People often confuse disclaimers with legal requirements for business correspondence under the Companies Act (etc.).

Disclaimers are probably worthless in law. Just because someone *thinks* they have legal weight, or look official and enforceable, it does not mean that they are.

ISS deprecate their usage, and ***there is no requirement*** for them at Newcastle University.

The only kind of disclaimer required by this institution is when you are expressing a personal opinion which should not be attributed to the University (see *Legal issues*, above).

## A few more pointers

*If you really want to know yet more...*

### Dealing with spam

<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/iss/email/spamaction.html>

### Disclaimers

Why you might use them:

<http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=808>

Why you should not:

<http://www.goldmark.org/jeff/stupid-disclaimers/>

“A lawyer writes”...

<http://www.weblaw.co.uk/artemail.php>

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