

# 10

## Communicating Through Email

Most of your day to day communication at the university, both official and unofficial, will be done by email. The simplicity of using email technically should not distract you from the care that needs to be taken as you write.



The most important thing to remember when you write an email is to consider its impact on your reader. Think about why you are writing the email and consider the tone and the way you express yourself. The more distant the relationship is between yourself and your reader, the more formal the tone and expression must be and the more carefully constructed your email will have to be. In other words, you should observe *email etiquette*.

This chapter helps you to:

- Know the basics
- Be aware of your relationship with your reader

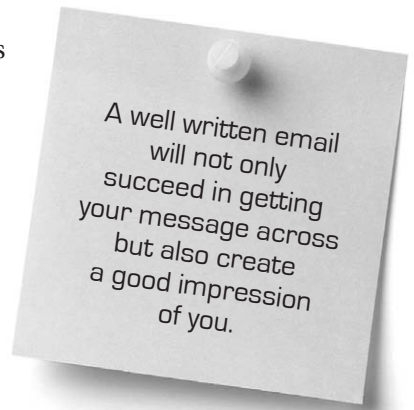
Without email etiquette, you may unintentionally give a poor impression of yourself to the reader. If you do this, you may fail to achieve your objective in writing the email and your reputation may be damaged. Conversely, a well written email will not only succeed in getting your message across but also create a good impression of you.

### 10.1 Know the Basics

Tone and presentation are the two basic elements you need to pay attention to when you write a formal email. Try to do the following:

- Use your NUS email address when writing to people at NUS. Emails from idiosyncratic email addresses may get “spammed”.
- Compose a subject line that is concise, relevant to the topic and will get the reader’s attention, e.g. *Apologies for absence from tutorial; Request for reference letter*.

- Start with a formal salutation, using the reader's full title and surname for a formal email, e.g. *Dear Professor Tan, Dear Dr Smith, Dear Ms Lim*. Make sure you know which part of the name is the surname. While Chinese names often put the family name first, in other names this is the last part of the name.
- Limit the content to one screen, if possible.
- Write proper paragraphs and leave spaces between paragraphs.
- Use subheadings, numbers and bullets, if relevant, to make your content easy to understand. Do not write in upper case letters as this is perceived as rude.
- Make sure your tone is courteous. Modal verbs such as *would* or *could* sound more polite than *can* or *will* and questions sound less demanding than direct requests, e.g. *Would it be possible to be excused from Monday's tutorial?* instead of: *I am not coming to class next Monday* or *Please could you send me the handouts I missed?* instead of: *Please send me the handouts*. Do not forget to say *please* and *thank you*.
- Choose an appropriate closing. Formal emails often end with *Regards* or *Best regards* and not usually with *Yours sincerely* or *Yours faithfully*.
- Make sure you know which are taboo topics in your context, e.g. money, sex or religion. Do not write to a tutor asking to borrow money or inviting him or her to a religious gathering.
- Always re-read and check an email carefully before you click *send*.



## 10.2 Be Aware of Your Relationship with Your Reader

Being aware of who your reader is, their position and their relationship to you is very important. Getting the correct tone is central to writing an email that will be well received and will achieve the purpose for which it was written.

The following two case studies, taken from emails written on campus, illustrate how things can go wrong.

### 10.2.1 Get the right style and tone for your reader

In this first case study a student needed to write to someone in authority to get permission to use a facility in the faculty. See Figure 1.

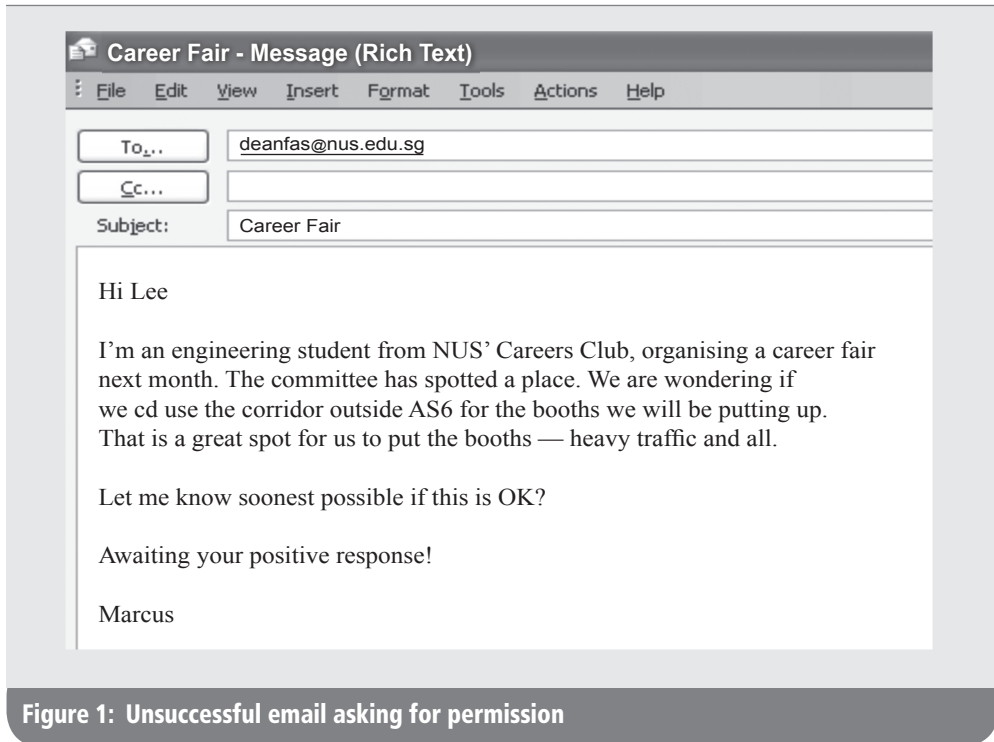
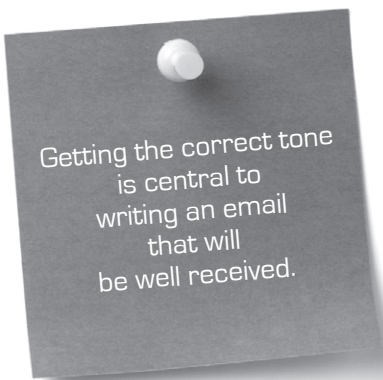
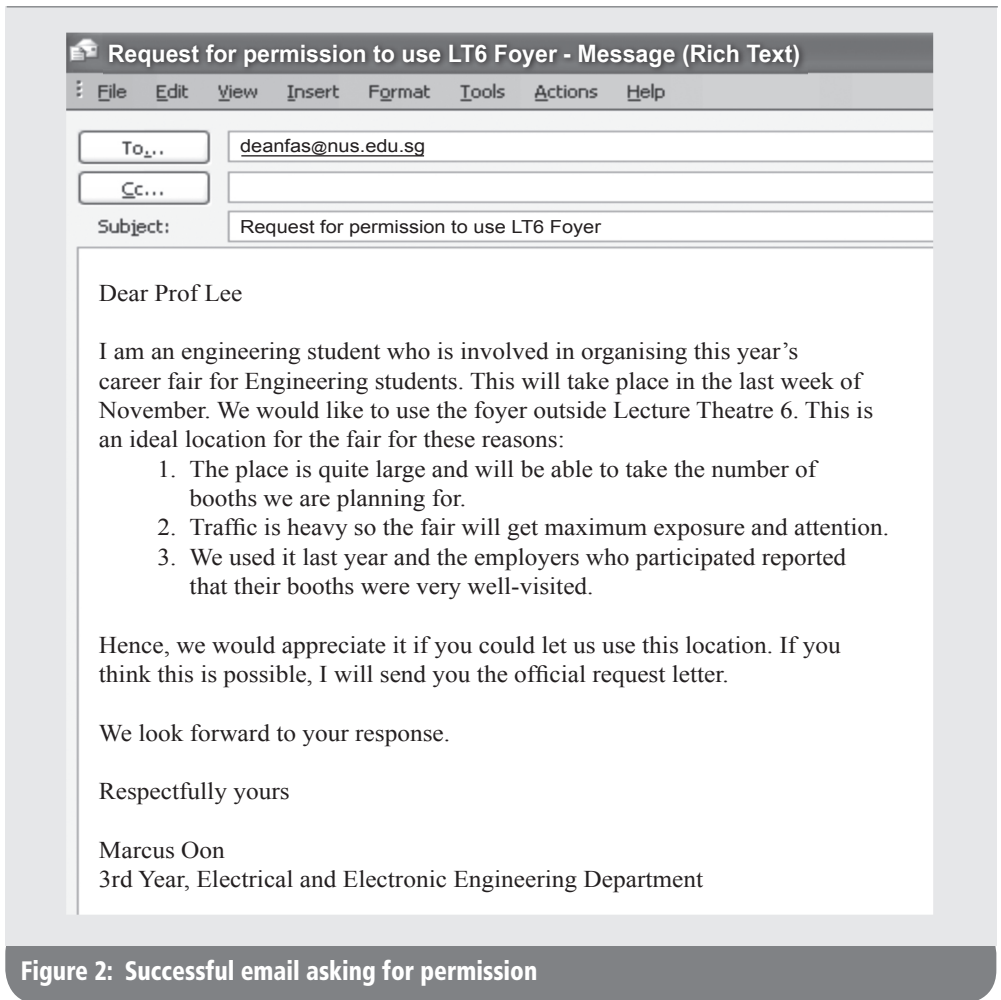


Figure 1: Unsuccessful email asking for permission

Here the problem is that the student has written in the way in which he would write to a friend, which is not appropriate when writing to someone in authority. Notice these faulty usages:

- Inexplicit subject line: What about the career fair?
- Inappropriate salutation: *Hi Lee*
- Short forms: *I'm, cd*
- Incomplete sentence: *Awaiting...* which has no subject
- Inappropriate punctuation: *Let me know soonest if this is OK?*
- Inappropriate tone: *Let me know soonest if this is OK?*
- Informal vocabulary: *a great spot*
- No expression of gratitude
- Lack of polite closing phrase
- Inappropriate signature: Signing off without surname implies familiarity.

In comparison, the email in Figure 2 is an effective communication because the writer uses the correct elements for writing to someone he does not know well who is in a position of authority. In other words, the writer shows awareness of the relationship between himself and the reader.



This email is appropriate for the reader in the following ways:

- Explicit subject line
- Appropriate salutation with proper title: *Prof*
- Full forms: *am, could*
- Complete sentence: *We look forward to your response.*
- Courteous tone: *We would appreciate it if you could let us use this location.*
- Formal vocabulary: *ideal location*
- Expression of gratitude: *We would appreciate it if you could let us use this location.*
- Polite closing phrase: *Respectfully yours*
- Appropriate signature: The full name is formal and ensures the reader knows who the writer is.

## 10.2.2 Be considerate of your reader

The student in the second case study needed to write to request a letter of recommendation. She sent the email on the Monday before the Tuesday in question. See Figure 3.

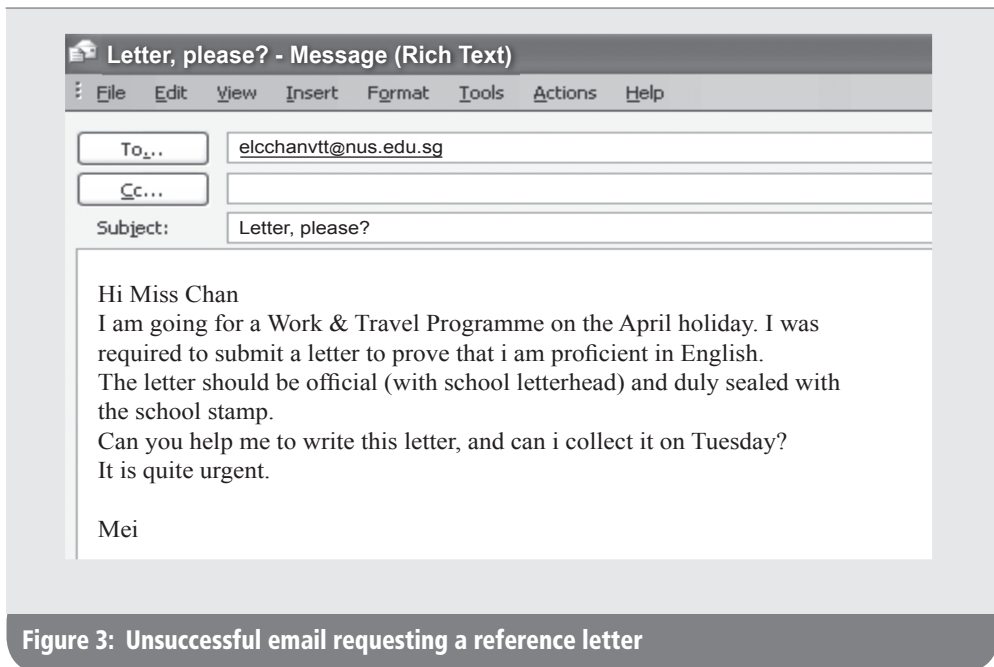


Figure 3: Unsuccessful email requesting a reference letter

This email creates a negative impression due to the following:

- This is an inconsiderate request as the writer is giving the tutor only a day to write the letter. The tutor will need to go through records and results in order to write the letter. Admitting the urgency of the request does nothing to make it less rude.
- The writer is also inconsiderate in that she does not consider the fact that the tutor may be teaching hundreds of students and may need some help to remember exactly who the writer is. She should have included information about for which course and in which semester she had been in the reader's class.
- The tone is also very demanding: *The letter should be official (with school letterhead) and duly sealed with the school stamp.* These might be the exact instructions given to the writer for the submission of the letter of recommendation but they should not be what she tells her tutor to do as the sentence sounds like an order. The writer could have said: *The letter needs to be submitted to department X and sealed with the official stamp.*
- There is no expression of gratitude.
- There is no polite closing phrase.
- The writer implies familiarity by signing off without her surname. In addition, the tutor needs the surname to help her recall the student.
- As an email requesting a statement attesting to the writer's proficiency in English, this email does not make a good impression because it is either poorly-written or poorly-edited, as it contains these errors:

Preposition: *on the April holiday*

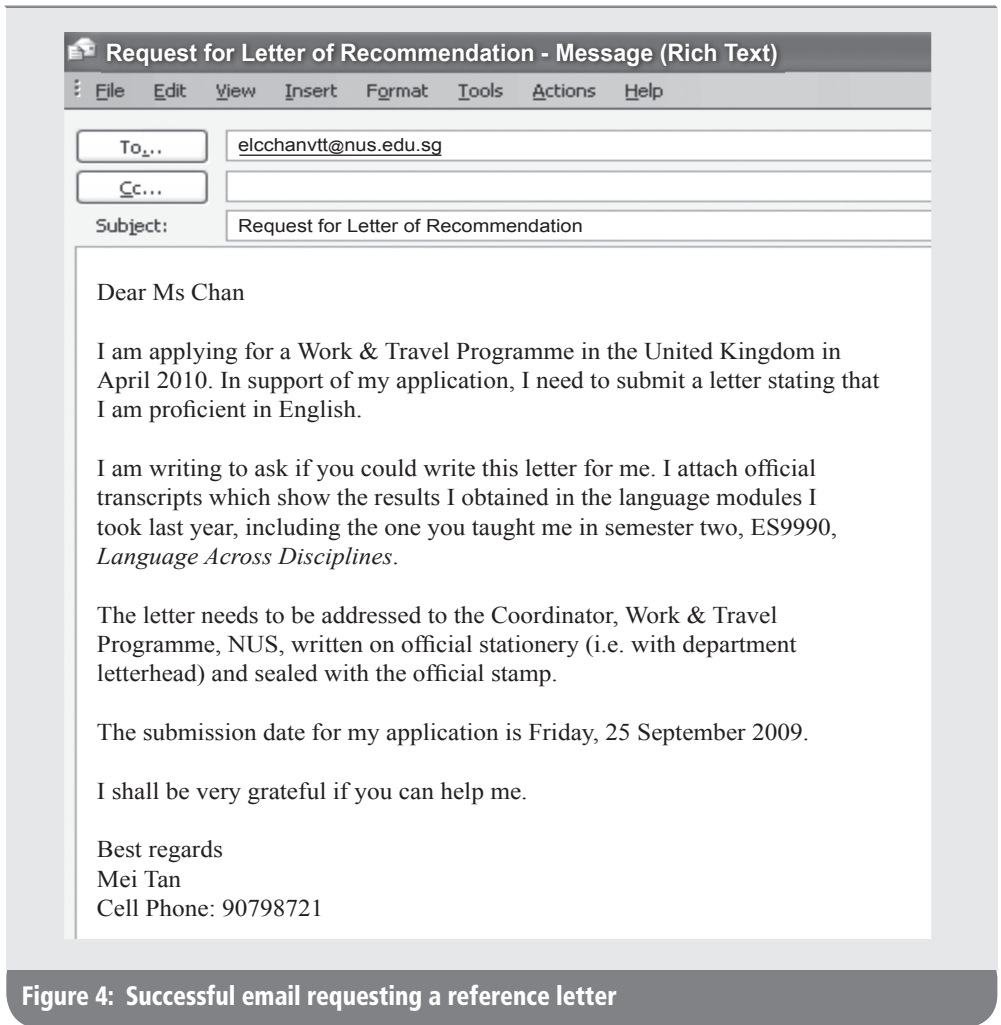
Tense: *was required*

Punctuation: *i* error made twice

Inaccuracy: *Can you help me to write this letter?* Who is writing the letter, the student or the instructor?

- Finally, the spacing and layout of the email is messy and unattractive.

Figure 4 shows the improved version.



## Conclusion

Whenever you write any formal email, remember that you want your email to achieve its purpose. To make sure this happens, you must create emails which are presented in an easy to read format, appropriately written with regard to tone and also show consideration of your reader.

**Further reading**

Baker, A. (2003). *Email etiquette*. Retrieved on June 15, 2009, from <http://oit.wvu.edu/email/Email%20Etiquette.pdf>

Lesikar, R., Flatley, M.E., & Rentz, K. (2008). Email. *Business communication – Making connections in a digital world* (11th ed.), pp. 96-109. New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin.

The OWL at Purdue (2008). *OWL Materials: Email etiquette*. Retrieved on June 15, 2009, from <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/636/01/>

**Chapter contributed by Peggine CHAN and LEE Gek Ling**