E-Mail Etiquette for Oberlin College Students

While e-mail is generally more informal than other methods of communication, it is still necessary to keep courtesy, respect, and ethics in mind. Here are a few recommendations:

The Basics
• Start each new correspondence with a greeting or acknowledgement of recipient.
• Say ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’
• Subject line should be topic-appropriate and specific. (e.g., “Staff meeting, 4/10, 3 pm, RSVP” is a better subject line than “meeting”)
• Return e-mail promptly, like you would a phone call or text message. If you don’t have time, send a quick note saying you will respond ASAP.
• If someone requests an RSVP, try to respond in a timely manner.
• While standard etiquette is to ask permission before forwarding an e-mail conversation, consider that your messages may be screen captured or forwarded to anyone at any time, either in part or in full.

The Text
• Use standard spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Set up your e-mail spell-checker. Resist the urge to send without proofreading.
• Consider e-mail a form of letter writing and resist the urge to be too informal in style or format.
• Capitalization is considered SHOUTING. It can be considered rude and ineffective.
• Send e-mails in plain text format rather than HTML; most, though not all, e-mail clients can read HTML format.

Your E-Mail Personality
• Customize your e-mail signature with relevant information (name, title, office name, phone number, etc.).
• Always remember to keep your recipient (and your relationship with them) in mind when crafting the tone of your e-mail.
• The tone you use in speech can be difficult to get across in e-mail; sarcasm and dry humor often fail.
• Use emoticons (smiley faces, etc.) sparingly; try to limit to informal messages.
• Avoid using e-mail to vent emotions online. Follow appropriate channels to resolve interpersonal conflicts, complaints, or disciplinary action; be careful not to alienate your reader and potentially make the problem worse. Instead, call or speak face to face.

Using E-mail via Mobile Devices
• Don’t rely solely on autocorrect feature. Proofread everything. Make necessary changes before sending a message via a mobile device.
• Consider adding a unique custom signature to your mobile e-mail accounts that will inform the recipient that you are not at your computer.

For questions about e-mail protocol, send e-mail to oswell@oberlin.edu and a peer educator will provide assistance.

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