



# You've Got Mail

by JUDY M. BERANGER

The romantic comedy, *You've Got Mail*, depicts how influential email messages can be in our lives. At the time of its release in 1998 over 400 million email accounts existed worldwide. By 2015, this had grown to a staggering 4.4 billion accounts with an average of 205 billion messages per day!

Emails are often fun, easy and quick for interaction with family, friends, parents, students, colleagues and others. We send updates, stay connected and share information without any need for face-to-face conversation. We value keeping in touch and experience first hand how thoughtfully-crafted emails can bring us closer together in life-giving ways. Writing a draft, leaving it for awhile and then rereading and tweaking after reflection, works well for all emails, especially those that are filled with emotion.

On the other hand, there are times when the sheer volume of emails received can be a struggle for teachers to read and respond to, while keeping up with other demands. Some emails are not relevant, and some emails should never be sent. Once an email is sent, it is out there! Emails can cause misunderstandings and assumptions and can be quite demanding. It is not unusual to hear comments like, "wish I hadn't pressed SEND because when I reread it an hour later I thought: this will come back to haunt me," or, "Did I ever regret hitting Reply All!" When receiving a disrespectful email message, a response is often futile and may only fuel confusion and conflict. In those times it is wise for us to delay writing a response to prevent further misunderstandings and assumptions. Teachers know that the best immediate response when emotions run high may be a delayed response, allowing time for full consideration. In rare situations, the best response is no response at all.

Less than two decades ago, if a teacher wanted to chat with a parent, or vice versa, they were as likely to do so by telephone or an appointment to meet at school. There was time to plan and to think. Today, email and other electronic communications can create a false sense of urgency, making us think that an immediate response is necessary, even when there is little, if any, thinking and reflection time.

Writing as concisely and clearly as possible and doing a quick review of a draft is always helpful. This is especially vital when a concern is raised in an email. Even when we think we are being respectful, it may still come across as critical and devaluing, thus it is important to be aware of our audience when we are sending the email. People who live with high conflict personalities read and understand through a different lens. What they mean to be assertive, often comes across as aggressive.

Sending a response immediately means that our writing may be highly influenced by our emotions in the heat of the moment. We may be less rational and less likely to consider potential repercussions. When sending out more general information, like email updates, we can write them in an intentionally relaxed manner. There is a felt difference to the recipient if the email message demands, rather than requests. "Staff debrief will be at 3:10 sharp!", instead of a calmer request saying, "There will be a staff debrief at 3:10 in the library."

Emotional emails are more likely to capture what we are really feeling at the moment it was written when it may be the wrong place to allow our feelings to creep into the text. Consequently, we may fail to get our point across or, worse yet, we could damage our relationship and reputation with the recipient. The last thing we want to do when responding to an email is to use it as an emotional venting tool to relieve our own stress while heightening the stress of the recipient.

There are situations where people have collected, saved and printed emails and threads of emails to demonstrate that they have been hard done by. In these cases, it may be important to respond to inaccurate statements with the accurate information that was taken out of context – but only once. If we choose to continue writing emails that are life draining, it is a sign to stop and think about exploring more life giving, self care strategies. Your Employee Assistance Program can help.

**The BIFF Acronym (Brief, Informative, Friendly, Firm)**

Bill Eddy, of the High Conflict Institute reminds us that we can also consider his BIFF technique for emails as well as other potentially high conflict communications. The BIFF technique comes to our aid anytime we are communicating with people who tend to be quite negative and exhibit high conflict personality traits. Eddy has many helpful resources available on his website at [www.highconflictinstitute.com](http://www.highconflictinstitute.com).

To reduce chances of a prolonged and angry back and forth, it is important to keep our responses as brief as possible, thus avoiding prolonged tensions which could never lead to positive outcomes. There are people who live with complicated operating systems that affect how they think. They truly believe they have no choice but to respond in anger, keeping the conflict going. As competent professionals, we can choose to not respond to any personal attacks and avoid judgements that will only intensify unwelcomed feedback. It is a gift if we can learn not to take any of this personally or at least “act” like we are not taking any of this to heart.

Responding to negative emails in a cordial and respectful manner, even though you may not feel like it, may help calm the other person. Consciously preparing and practising a respectful response will increase the chances of getting at least a neutral response in return. If our goal is to change the communication pattern, then acting and sounding respectful has the greatest likelihood of success. Kristin Byron, researcher and professor at Syracuse University, found that emails which are hastily composed, rather than well considered, generally increased the likelihood of conflict and miscommunication. As teachers, we can minimize this by encouraging curiosity, not defensiveness, while acknowledging there may be times when the only appropriate option is to disengage.

**Themes**

Other helpful strategies found in the literature include:

- Never write an email that you would be embarrassed to see circulated on social media or in print.
- Ensure you have the correct email address and are sending to the right person. It is wise to enter the email address last to protect against sending the email before you have a chance to proofread.
- Email can be a good medium for a message when a record needs to be kept of details.
- Include a clear, direct subject line to increase the likelihood of it being read.
- Only use “Reply to All” when you believe your message is relevant to everyone on the list.

- Some of the literature suggests being “emoticon free” while other literature suggests it is fine. What is common is to stay away from using too many emoticons, capital letters, exclamation points, and bold or colored fonts. Exclamation points should be used sparingly and only to suggest excitement.
- Be cautious with humour in emails. When in doubt, leave it out. Humour is said to sometimes get lost without the right tone or facial expressions.
- Avoid judging others’ intentions based on a few sentences. Practice moving from critical interpretation to supportive interpretation. When we are delivering a criticism or disappointing message, consider nesting it between two very encouraging points.
- Accept that there may be times in your personal life when disengaging from writing or responding to any emails with a person is the right thing to do. This is not uncommon when unhappy or volatile relationships come to an end and one person is unwilling to stop obsessive or controlling contact.
- Barbara Pachter, author of *The Essentials of Business Etiquette*, cautions on the importance of being sensitive to cultural differences, especially in writing forms like email messages.
- A popular way to end an email is to develop a signature block which includes an inspiring quote, or a comment of our own that will stay with the recipient in a positive way. Try searching online for “inspiring quotes for email signature blocks” for some great suggestions.

As in *You’ve Got Mail*, we see many examples of how email can be a vehicle to enhance and enrich our lives by providing an efficient mode of communication. However, it is important to control this tool and use it carefully as it has the equal potential to create wonder or havoc in both our professional and personal lives. As attributed to author, Charles Swindoll, maintaining control of your reactions to what comes your way in life – whether in the form of email messages or any other happenstance – is a critical life skill. “Life is 10 percent what happens to you and 90 percent how you react to it.”

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