

BREAKING STEREOTYPES IN EMAIL WRITING

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Is switching on the computer the first thing you do when you get to work? Have you ever written an email to a colleague sitting next to you rather than speaking to her? Have you wondered what office work would be like without a computer? How did people 50 years back begin their day at work?

The office environment, work culture, employees' daily routines have changed drastically since the email arrived. As per a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)[\[1\]](#), on average, an office worker receives 120 emails per day. Many check emails throughout the day and some even sleep with smart phones under their pillows to be able to answer instantly, even in the middle of the night. Does this depict loyalty or sycophancy? I leave it up to you. But the use of emails in business communication is a given and there are many interesting questions on this topic. This article focuses on two such questions: (a) Is there a largely accepted way of writing emails or particularly any stereotypes and (b) why do we write the way we write?

Is there a largely accepted way of writing emails or any stereotypes?

Given the significance of email writing, almost all the MBA programmes offer a course on Business Communication that includes a module on this topic. But practically, over time, the language used in official emails has become stereotypical - the stereotypes could be in terms of words chosen or the grammar or even the structure. For instance, have you ever received an email with only three syllables 'pfa', 'fyi' and no context at all? It's annoying, that is one part, but it also complicates communication. Some more examples are given below. These have been divided into three categories – Complicated, Unnecessary and Hypocritical; one example can also fit multiple categories. While complicated is hard to understand, unnecessary is offering what is more than required, and hypocritical is passive-aggressive or contradictory and often offensive. A simpler suggested version for the same words/sentences is also presented.

Table 1: Complicated

Dear All	Dear Colleagues or Dear Students or Dear Members of the Selection Committee or Dear Clients and so on
Please make it convenient to attend	Please attend
Please let me know	Explain or Apprise me
Update the undersigned	Update me
Dear Sir/Madam	Dear 'Name' (identified through a search engine)

Table 2: Unnecessary

Greetings	Nothing or Good Morning or Good Evening
Suggestions if any	Suggestions
Kind Regards	Regards
Congratulations!!!!!!	Congratulations!
URGENT	The deadline is

Table 3: Hypocritical

Gentle reminder	A reminder
According to me	I feel or I think
Send your response by 5 pm today	The deadline communicated by _____ to me is _____
As discussed	With reference to our discussion/meeting held on
This has been delayed quite a lot	We are going very slowly

In many cases, the language can be improved by slight tweaking. Using simple words, speaking from an ‘I’ perspective and being empathetic to the recipient’s reactions are some rules that can be used in this context. But how are these stereotypes formed? I try to answer in the next section.

Why do we write the way we write?

One reason could be the burden of British imperialism that we still carry, particularly in the bureaucracy and the public sector organizations. Preference for using ‘undersigned’ instead of ‘me’ is complicated but symbolizes power distance.

The second reason could be that culturally we are raised to conform. While trying to find out how kids are born at the age of 12, my friend and I were severely reprimanded by her mother; so we kept referring to Bollywood for answers. We also never got responses to questions like, “Why can’t we eat eggs on Tuesdays?”, “Why don’t we wash hair on Thursdays?”, “Why are Gods so overdressed?”, “Why are women not allowed at funerals?” and so on. In school too, non-compliance was punished and conformity was rewarded. Gradually, not asking questions became the best way to deal with things around. This happens with email language too, which is why usually people from the same office use similar sentences.

Lastly, it could be that English is not the mother tongue for many Indians but it is the language of business. Thinking in one’s mother tongue and translating it into English, sometimes leads to confusing phrases like “we are like that only” and “we chatted yesterday.” As a natural tendency, when in confusion it is safer to use what everyone else is using.

Language is like Biryani – it needs all the ingredients of the right quality in the right quantity added at the appropriate time for the outcome to look good, smell good and taste good. But everyone does not like Biryani and that is okay; the same goes for language. It is an art to use language to reach people, form relationships and sustain them, influence them, calm them, inspire them or even instigate them. In this entire philosophical realm, why should we practically pay attention to email writing? It is not because success is dependent on language that one must pay attention to it but because stereotypes are meant to be broken down for the evolution of culture- whether it is business or society. If we keep rewarding mediocrity and conformity, it won't be fun in the long run; everyone will burn out.

[1] <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/technology/pages/study-reveals-most-check-work-e-mail-at-home.aspx>