

Email Best Practices Guide

Email is Carnegie Mellon's primary channel for internal communications to faculty, staff and students, and can be highly effective when leveraged correctly.

This guide is intended to assist CMU communicators in planning an email strategy and crafting more effective and accessible emails, regardless of platform. These best practices and tips will increase the likelihood that your email message is opened, read and engaged with by your target audience.

The UCM Internal Communications team is always available to serve as a resource and strategic partner, and we are happy to review and suggest edits to email drafts.

For questions or assistance, contact Director of Internal Communications [Jen Roupe](#).

General Best Practices

- **Aim for impact, not volume.** Not every piece of information warrants a standalone email. Use emails for important, need-to-know information. Share nonurgent updates in a newsletter to ensure critical messages stand out and get read.
- **Ensure accessibility.** CMU's [Digital Accessibility Policy](#) requires electronic communications to be accessible to all community members, including those with disabilities. Tips are highlighted throughout this guide and summarized in the Accessibility section at the end.
 - *Accessibility Tip: Accessibility guidelines make emails easier for everyone to read!*
- **Avoid long, text-heavy emails.** People are busy, and attention spans are short. Be direct and succinct, and assume most readers will only skim the email. Less is always more.
- **Avoid frequent, repeated messages.** Limit reminder emails and leverage other channels, such as newsletters, for follow-ups and additional reminders.
- **Be consistent.** Regular emails such as newsletters should be sent on a consistent day and time so your audience knows when to expect updates from you.
- **Proof and test.** Send a test email to yourself and a few others to proof for accuracy and check that all links work properly. If possible, view the email on desktop and mobile in different email applications and web browsers, as well as in dark mode.

Email Types: CAN-SPAM Compliance

The [FTC CAN-SPAM Act](#) regulates the sending of mass email. It categorizes emails into two types based on their **primary purpose**: commercial or transactional/relationship.

- **Commercial messages** primarily promote a product or service, including web content. They convey *nice-to-know* information. Most emails fall into this category, including invitations,

solicitations, press releases and most newsletters. These emails *must* include:

- A sender name and email address that accurately identify the sender
- A subject line that accurately reflects the message content
- A way to opt-out of future emails via an **unsubscribe link**
- The sender's physical address
- **Transactional/relationship messages** primarily deliver information related to an agreed-upon transaction or relationship between the sender and recipient. They convey *need-to-know* information that impacts day-to-day operations or experience, such as emergency messages, policy changes, benefits information, etc. These emails should NOT include an unsubscribe link.

Audience

Your message should be relevant to all or most of its recipients. The more irrelevant emails people receive from a sender, the less likely they are to read future emails from that sender.

- **Use a targeted list** of recipients for whom your message is relevant. This will boost open and engagement rates and reduce unsubscribes. It also builds trust with your audience, so they know when they receive an email from you, it is worth their time.
- **Leverage newsletters** or other channels to share information with a broader audience.

NOTE: Messages to the broader CMU community (all faculty, all staff, all students, etc.) must be coordinated with UCM Internal Communications to determine appropriate channels and timing.

Sender & Replies

- **The sender name** must accurately identify the source of the message and should be a recognizable CMU person, office or organization, e.g. Jim Garrett, CMU Police, Staff Council.
- **The sender and reply-to email addresses** should always be cmu.edu addresses. Many platforms allow these two email addresses to be different if you prefer that replies go to a different mailbox than the sender's.

Subject Line

A good subject line is concise, descriptive and compelling.

- **Aim for 30-50 characters** including spaces. Additional text will be cut off on mobile devices.
- **Convey the primary purpose** or call to action at the beginning of the subject line.
- **Avoid cryptic/misleading language** and vague phrases such as "An important message from"
- **Consider personalization** where possible and appropriate.
- **Use sentence case or title case.** All caps may trigger spam filters.

- **Limit excessive punctuation (!!!) and emojis**, which may trigger spam filters.

Preheader

A preheader is the line of text that appears below the subject line in a recipient's inbox (if enabled). If a preheader is not available, the email client will automatically pull the first line of the email.

- **Aim for 60 characters or less** to avoid text being cut off on mobile, and use sentence case.
- Provide additional information about the purpose or call to action that **complements the subject line** and does not simply repeat or rephrase it.

Length & Format

Studies show that people only spend about **8 seconds** scanning an email, and they ask themselves **two questions**: What is this about? and Why is it relevant to me? If they can't find answers in a few seconds, they move on. Ensure your email is easy to scan and answers those questions up front.

- **Optimal length is 250-500 words** for a non-newsletter email, or 1-2 minutes of read time. Long walls of narrative text are rarely read in full and more likely to lose the reader quickly.
 - *Accessibility tip: Long, text-heavy emails can be overwhelming to neurodiverse readers.*
- **Chunk text into short sections and use descriptive headers, bold text and bullets** to make information easy to scan, and also to add white space for better readability.
 - *Accessibility tip: Use heading styles in order (<h1> <h2> etc.) and don't skip levels to assist screen readers in navigating content and conveying information hierarchy.*
- **Put the most important information at the top**, including the primary call to action.
- If you have a lot of information to convey, hit the key points and **link to a web page for details**.

Content

- View in Browser Link
 - **Include a "View this email in a web browser" link** at the top of the email in case it does not load properly. Many email platforms can generate this link automatically.
- Salutation/Headline
 - **Not all emails need to be a letter** from someone. Announcements, news and invitations can begin with a headline instead of a salutation.
 - **The salutation should describe the audience** (e.g., Dear Pittsburgh Faculty and Staff).
 - **Consider personalization** where available and appropriate (e.g., Dear [First Name]).
- Language, Voice and Style

- **Use short sentences and plain language** that is clear, to the point and easy to understand the first time. Avoid jargon, flowery words and complex sentences.
 - *Accessibility tip: Plain language is especially important for those with cognitive challenges or language barriers.*
- **Use active voice and speak in the second person**, addressing the reader as “you.”
- **Follow [CMU Writing Guidelines](#)** and AP Style.
- **Links**
 - **Use descriptive text** that explains where the link takes you, not “Click here” or “Learn more” (e.g., visit the [Student Affairs website](#)). Don’t use the full URL unless it is short.
 - *Accessibility tip: Descriptive links are critical for those using screen readers.*
 - **Use a button** to ask the reader to *do something* (e.g., Register for the workshop) and **use a text link** to ask the reader to *go somewhere* (e.g., Visit the HR website).
 - **Underline text links** to visually signal it is a link. Don’t underline text that is not a link.
 - *Accessibility tip: Don’t use color as the only way to identify a link; readers with color blindness may not be able to distinguish the link from regular text.*
 - **Limit links.** The more links, the lower the click rate for each. The optimal number for non-newsletter emails is two, one at the top and one near the bottom.
- **Images**
 - **Minimize image use.** Some email clients will not load images. Never send an email that is all images, and never use images of text in place of actual text (exception: header graphics with alt-text). Aim for about a 70:30 or 80:20 text-to-image ratio.
 - *Accessibility tip: Screen readers cannot read text in images.*
 - **Add alt-text to all images.** Describe what’s in the image, including any text. Avoid “Image of” or “Photo of” and be specific yet simple. Decorative images can be labeled as such. Charts and graphs should include alt-text and captions.
 - *Accessibility tip: Alt-text is critical for those using screen readers.*
 - **Use web-resolution JPG, PNG or GIF files.** Large high-res images may load slowly or not at all. Images should be resized to no more than 2x the desired display size.
 - **Link to videos, don’t embed.** Many email clients do not support video in an email. Use a thumbnail image with a “play” arrow and link to the video online.
- **Closing**
 - **Include contact information** for questions or feedback, usually the name and email address of a CMU person or office. The reply-to email address should match if possible.

- **Include name and title in the signature** if the email is in letter format.
- **Footer**
 - **Include basic sender information**, including organization name, physical address, website address and if desired, social media links.
 - **Put the unsubscribe link** in the footer (unless the email is transactional).
 - **For transactional emails**, indicate why the user received it, e.g., “You are receiving this email because of your status as a CMU student, faculty and/or staff member.”

Design

- **Follow [The CMU Brand Visual Identity Guidelines](#)** for all university emails.
- **Use a mobile-friendly design**, either a single-column layout or a responsive design that stacks multiple columns into a single column on mobile.
- **Use a CMU-branded header** that is 600-800 pixels wide by 100-200 pixels high.
- **Use a web-safe font** supported by all email clients: Arial, Georgia, Helvetica, Tahoma, Times New Roman or Verdana. The CMU brand font Open Sans is supported by many email clients, including Gmail. If using Open Sans, set Helvetica as the backup font.
- **Use a minimum body text size of 14 points** for readability and to ensure text hyperlinks are large enough to be tappable on mobile.
- **Left-align text** and avoid center or right alignment.
 - *Accessibility tip: Left-aligned text is easier for those with reading disabilities to process.*

Accessibility

Email accessibility is the practice of designing your emails so that all people, including those with disabilities or assistive devices, can receive and interact with your content. A summary of key tips:

- **Color:** Ensure a color contrast ratio of at least 4.5:1 between the text and background colors. Do not use color alone to convey information, such as in a chart or hyperlink.
- **Text:** Dense, complex text is difficult for those with neurodiversity or language barriers to read. Use plain language, be concise, left-align text and chunk content into short sections.
- **Headings:** Screen readers use heading levels to navigate content and convey information hierarchy to the user. Use heading styles in order (<h1> <h2> etc.) and do not skip levels.
- **Lists:** Use the bulleted or numbered list function in the software you are using to ensure your list is accessible and correctly interpreted by screen readers.
 - Use bulleted lists when the order is not significant.
 - Use numbered lists for steps in a process or to convey that the order is significant.

- **Links:** Use descriptive, relevant text for links, and underline link text. For example: “Visit the [Student Affairs website](#)” not “To visit the Student Affairs website, [click here](#).”
 - Don’t use full URLs unless they are very short, such as [events.cmu.edu](#).
 - If you link to the same thing more than once in an email, use identical link text. Links to different places should have unique text.
- **Images:** Ensure all images have descriptive alt-text for those using screen readers. Charts and graphs should have both alt-text and captions. Don’t use images of text in place of text itself (except a header graphic with alt-text).

For more information or guidance on accessibility best practices, visit the [Digital Accessibility Office website](#) or email digital-access@andrew.cmu.edu.