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How to Write Email with Military Precision

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In the military, a poorly formatted email may be the difference between mission accomplished and mission failure. During my active duty service, I learned how to structure emails to maximize a mission's chances for success. Since returning from duty, I have applied these lessons to emails that I write for my corporate job, and my

missives have consequently become crisper and cleaner, eliciting quicker and higher-quality responses from colleagues and clients. Here are three of the main tips I learned on how to format your emails with military precision:

1. Subjects with keywords. The first thing that your email recipient sees is your name and subject line, so it's critical that the subject clearly states the purpose of the email, and specifically, what you want them to do with your note. Military personnel use keywords that characterize the nature of the email in the subject. Some of these keywords include:

- ACTION - Compulsory for the recipient to take some action
- SIGN - Requires the signature of the recipient
- INFO - For informational purposes only, and there is no response or action required
- DECISION - Requires a decision by the recipient
- REQUEST - Seeks permission or approval by the recipient
- COORD - Coordination by or with the recipient is needed

The next time you email your direct reports a status update, try using the subject line: INFO - Status Update. And if you need your manager to approve your vacation request, you could write REQUEST - Vacation. If you're a project manager who requires responses to your weekly implementation report from several people, type ACTION - Weekly Implementation Report. These demarcations might seem obvious or needlessly exclamatory because they are capitalized. But your emails will undoubtedly stand out in your recipient's inbox, and they won't have to work out the purpose of your emails. (It also forces you to think about what you really want from someone before you contribute to their inbox clutter.)

2. Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF). Military professionals lead their emails with a short, staccato statement known as the BLUF. (Yes, being the military, there is an acronym for everything.) It declares the purpose of the email and action required. The BLUF

should quickly answer the five W's: who, what, where, when, and why. An effective BLUF distills the most important information for the reader. Here's an example BLUF from the Air Force Handbook:

> BLUF: Effective 29 Oct 13, all Air Force Doctrine Documents (AFDDs) have been rescinded and replaced by core doctrine volumes and doctrine annexes.

The BLUF helps readers quickly digest the announcement, decision, and when the new procedures go into effect. The reader doesn't necessarily want to know all the background information that led to the decision. He or she likely wants to know "how does this email affect me?" and the BLUF should answer this question every time.

For my corporate job, I don't use the acronym "BLUF" because it would be unclear to recipients, but I have started leading with "Bottom Line" in bold at the start of my notes. Sometimes, I even highlight the bottom line in yellow so that my point is abundantly clear. Here is an example of a BLUF adapted for corporate use:

Subject: INFO - Working from home

Shannon,

Bottom Line: We will reduce the number of days that employees can work from home from three to one day per week effective December 1st.

Background:

- This is an effort to encourage team morale and foster team collaboration
- All members of the management committee supported this decision

Shannon knows that no response is required because it was marked INFO. She also quickly grasps the information in the email because of the Bottom Line. Because this is a big change in corporate policy, background details are provided to show that the decision is final, supported by management, and intended to result in positive effects for the company.

3. Be economical. Military personnel know that short emails are more effective than long ones, so they try to fit all content in one pane, so the recipient doesn't have to scroll. They also eschew the passive voice because it tends to make sentences longer, or as the Air Force manual puts it, "Besides lengthening and twisting sentences, passive verbs often muddy them." Instead, use active voice, which puts nouns ahead of verbs, so it's clear who is doing the action. By using active voice, you are making the "verbs do the work for you." Instead of, "The factory was bombed by an F18," military professionals would say, "An F18 bombed the factory."

Even though short emails are usually more effective, long emails abound, even in the military. If an email requires more explanation, you should list background information after the BLUF as bullet points so that recipients can quickly grasp your message, like in the above example.

Lastly, to prevent clogging inboxes, military professionals link to attachments rather than attaching files. This will force the recipient to check the website that has the attachment, which will likely provide the most recent version of a file. Also, the site will verify that the recipient has the right security credentials to see the file, and you don't inadvertently send a file to someone who isn't permitted to view it.

Here is an email example for corporate use that uses keywords in the subject, bottom line, background bullets, and active voice:

Subject: INFO - Meeting Change

Shannon,

Bottom Line: We scheduled the weekly update meeting for Thursday at 2 PM CST to accommodate the CFO's schedule.

Background:

- We searched for other available times, but this is the only time that works, and it's important that you are on the call, so that you can address your P&L.
- CFO will be in Boston on Thursday meeting at an offsite with the management committee.
- He wants to review the financial report that can be found here (insert link) before the call.

By adopting military email etiquette, you will introduce a kernel of clarity to your correspondence and that of your colleagues and clients.

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