

editor's note



WHENEVER I TELL PEOPLE THERE ARE ONLY 17 LAWS IN SOCCER, THEY SEEM SURPRISED. But from the size of the ball to the intricacies of offside, that's all there are. So when I did a recent presentation on business writing, I decided I should just as easily be able to summarize the rules of email into 17 laws.

1. Write a meaningful subject line (don't title your email "meeting"; rather, tell me it's "notes from Monday's meetings").
2. Don't overuse the "high priority" option (everyone's email is urgent to them!).
3. Keep it focused and readable: be brief (a lot of people don't read beyond the first few paragraphs); use standard capitalization and spelling (not everyone understands that u r gr8); skip lines between paragraphs; avoid fancy typefaces; don't use ALL CAPS (it's shouting!); be clear (short paragraphs facilitate understanding); use emoticons sparingly; and be precise and to the point.
4. Minimize the use of attachments (large attachments are sometimes blocked by IT departments, sometimes they come across as spam, often they can't be opened on mobile devices); if possible, either paste relevant sections into the email or post the document to be viewed with a web browser.
5. Always identify yourself (use a signature line).
6. Don't make personal attacks.
7. Proofread your message (whether you're writing to one person or a blast email to 30,000, it's still a professional communication).
8. Don't assume privacy (email is easily forwarded).
9. Distinguish between formal and informal situations (err on the side of formality).
10. Don't "respond all" when you mean to respond to an individual.
11. Don't forward chain letters (and be careful sending jokes—they're easily misinterpreted).
12. Don't respond to spam (it will only cause you to receive more!).
13. Respond promptly.
14. Answer all of the questions that are asked in an email.
15. Show respect and restraint; be tolerant of others; don't take insult where none was intended.
16. Don't assume you know the emotional state of an email writer; remember, emails don't readily convey all the information you get from body language and tone in a face-to-face conversation.
17. Don't send long URLs (use a service, such as www.tinyurl.com that shortens URLs).

Of course, every good referee knows there's an unwritten 18th Law. And that same law applies in writing emails: Use common sense.

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