

Keeping up with your inbox – the evolution of the email signoff

Level: Advanced (C1–C2)

Time: Approximately 90 minutes

Business topics: Communication, email

Business language: Useful business vocabulary, email language

Activities: Key words, understanding the text, register, discussion, emailing conventions and register

Groups: Whole class, one-to-one, small groups

Overview: This article discusses the current (dire) state of work email, including the trend of using self-promotional sign-offs and permanent out-of-office replies.

1. Warmer

- a. Ask students to discuss the questions in pairs or small groups. Elicit the main ideas that arise from the discussion from the whole class.

2. Reading for gist

- a. Have students skim the article (perhaps give them a time limit of two minutes) and choose the main idea.

Key: 2

3. Key words

- a. Have students scan the article and find the key words individually and compare their answers in pairs. Elicit answers from the whole class.

Key:

1. *dire*
2. *naff*
3. *earshot*
4. *rummage*
5. *nudge*
6. *irksome*

7. *arsenal*
8. *deploy, deployed*
9. *resort to*
10. *sprawling*
11. *bombardment*
12. *menace*
13. *deluge*
14. *balloon, (have) ballooned*

4. Understanding the article

- a. Ask students to scan the article individually to complete this activity and then to compare their answers. Remind them that they don't need to read the whole article each time but that they should rather look over it very quickly to locate the information and then read carefully.

Key:

- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| 1. <i>b</i> | 5. <i>b</i> |
| 2. <i>a</i> | 6. <i>b</i> |
| 3. <i>a</i> | 7. <i>a</i> |
| 4. <i>b</i> | 8. <i>b</i> |

5. Business language

- a. First check understanding of register by asking students to give examples of formal and informal greetings. (E.g., formal: *Good morning, Ms West. / Dear sir or madam / Ladies and gentlemen;* Informal: *Hi Sue / Hey*)

Ask students to complete the activity in pairs or small groups and to discuss each word or phrase. Then elicit answers from the whole class.

Key:

1. *formal passive voice structure and the word choice "deem"*
2. *informal word choice*
3. *informal choice of content "workout onesie", which is very familiar*
4. *formal word choice instead of "said"*
5. *neutral word choice*
6. *informal word choice "loads"*
7. *slightly formal structure "as ... confirmed"*
8. *formal word choice and structure as opposed to "I won't be able to"*
9. *formal word choice and structure as opposed to "I won't be able to"*

- b. Ask students to discuss possible substitutions/paraphrasing in pairs or small groups.

Key (suggested answers):

1. *other people had already called (it)*
2. *unstylish, tasteless, unfashionable*
3. *becoming increasingly unpopular, going out of vogue, no longer in vogue*
4. *said / wrote*
5. *confusing*
6. *multitudes / a surprising number of people*
7. *a look through my inbox confirmed this / I saw this was true when I looked through my inbox*
8. *I won't be able to / It won't be possible for me to*
9. *It won't be possible to*

- c. Ask students to work together to rewrite the sentences.

Key (suggested answers):

1. *Formal: Others, employed by performance coaches, were doubtless encouraged to produce such lines.*
Informal: Other people, who work for performance coaches, were probably told to write things like that.
2. *Formal: The fact that it did not come to my attention what anyone was currently reading or engaged in, until I purposely investigated, most likely suggests these alerts are not as useful as senders intend them to be.*
Informal: I didn't notice what anyone was currently reading, or focusing on, until I went looking for it, which probably means these comments aren't as useful as senders reckon.
3. *Formal: Likewise, this is true for a more sobering development that is itself a telling comment on the state of corporate email: the burgeoning number of people resorting to a sign-off that politely informs senders not to expect a response.*
Informal: The same goes for another trend that exposes the shocking state of office email: the number of people that now use a sign-off that politely tells emailers they won't be getting a reply.
4. *Formal: An acquaintance from a sprawling international network where email bombardment is a constant menace has deployed a sign-off that informs the sender: "Due to the high number of emails I receive daily, I am unable to respond to all messages. For urgent matters, please call ..."*

Informal: A guy I know who works for a massive international network where he's always overwhelmed by emails has a sign-off that says: "I get a lot of emails and can't reply to them all. Please call if it's urgent."

6. Discussion

- a. Put the students in pairs or small groups and ask them to discuss the questions. When students have covered all the questions, bring the whole class back together so that they can share their answers and any interesting information that arose from their discussions. Make note of good examples of vocabulary and language on the board, as well as incorrect usage that needs to be corrected. Ask the class to identify which is which and help you with corrections.

7. Wider business theme – email writing

- a. For this first step, first ask students to work in pairs or small groups. Then go over the answers with the class.

Key:

1. *d (This is formal and the tone is respectful.)*
 2. *c (Formal. Informal could be: Hi Ross, Could you please help us to schedule/arrange a visit to our factory? Our DWXN-03 machine is due a service.)*
 3. *a (Neutral. More informal could be: "How are things? Wanted to ask you about ..." More formal could be: "I hope this email finds you well. I am writing with regard to/with reference to ...")*
 4. *e (Slightly formal – previous activity contained more formal and informal versions)*
 5. *b (Informal. More neutral could be "Best" or simply ending with your name; More formal could be: "Best regards", "Kind regards")*
- b. If you have more time, you can ask students to research all the different elements mentioned in the previous activity. Alternatively, you can assign one or two elements to each group or ask each group to focus on a different register. Give students time to do their research and encourage them to find several examples of emailing phrases for each section. Ask students to include something that is relevant to their work in "other". E.g. giving customers information, asking for a quote, asking a provider for changes.

c. Regroup students so they can share their phrases with each other to complete the table.

Key (possible answers):

	<i>Informal</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Formal</i>
Greeting	<i>Hey</i>	<i>Hello James</i>	<i>Dear Ms Fines</i>
Opening	<i>How's things? Wanted to ask you about ...</i>	<i>I hope your week is going well. I'm writing because ...</i>	<i>I hope this email finds you well. I am writing with regard to/with reference to ...</i>
Giving background information	<i>I saw your talk about citizen journalism the other day. It was really interesting!</i>	<i>My name's Jenny Arnaud. I'm a journalism student at Sunhill University. I came to your recent talk on citizen journalism, and I found your points fascinating.</i>	<i>My name is Jenny Arnaud and I am in my third year of Journalism Studies at Sunhill University. I was delighted to attend your presentation on citizen journalism last week.</i>
Making a request	<i>Could you please help us to schedule/arrange a visit to our factory? Our DWXN-03 machine is due a service.</i>	<i>We would like to schedule a visit to have our DWXN-03 machine serviced.</i>	<i>I am writing to request your assistance with our DWXN-03 machine, which requires a service.</i>
Signing off	<i>"Live long and prosper" – Star Trek Cheers,</i>	<i>Currently reading: Best/Regards,</i>	<i>Best regards, Kind regards,</i>
Out of office reply / Permanent no reply	<i>I get a lot of emails and can't reply to them all. Please call if it's urgent.</i>	<i>Thank you for your email. I'm away from the office until 5 June. If you have an urgent request, please contact Noah Simons.</i>	<i>Due to the high number of emails I receive daily, I am unable to respond to all messages. For urgent matters, please call ...</i>