

Adrian Wallwork

ENGLISH

for Academic
Correspondence
and Socializing



Springer

English for Academic Correspondence and Socializing

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Preface

Who is this book for?

This book is for PhD students, researchers, lecturers, and professors in any discipline whose first language is not English. The book will teach you how to use English to carry out everyday activities in your academic work, such as writing emails, dealing with referees and editors, making phone calls, and socializing at conferences.

What are the three most important things I will learn from this book?

This book is based on three fundamental guidelines.

1 THINK FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF YOUR INTERLOCUTOR

Whether you are writing an email to a colleague, responding to a referee's report, or interacting face to face over the dinner table at a social event, it pays to put yourself in your interlocutor's shoes. This also means that you always try to be diplomatic and constructive.

2 WRITE CONCISELY WITH NO REDUNDANCY AND NO AMBIGUITY, AND YOU WILL MAKE FEWER MISTAKES IN YOUR ENGLISH

The more you write, the more mistakes in English you will make. If you avoid redundant words and phrases you will significantly increase the readability of whatever document you are writing.

3 RECOGNIZE THAT UNDERSTANDING THE SPOKEN ENGLISH OF NATIVE SPEAKERS DOES NOT NEED TO BE A NIGHTMARE

You will learn from this book that even native speakers sometimes do not completely understand each other. If you don't understand them, it is not necessarily a reflection

of the level of your English. Communication is a two-way activity in which both parties are equally responsible for the outcome. You will learn that you simply need to adopt certain strategies when dealing with native speakers and have the confidence to interrupt them as often as you feel is necessary.

What else will I learn?

You will learn how to

- write emails that your recipient will open, read, and respond to
- use standard phrases correctly, and with the right level of formality
- improve your usage of tenses (past, present, future)
- significantly improve your chances of having your paper published by interacting in a constructive way with referees and editors
- talk to key people at conferences and thus improve your chances of having a good career
- understand spoken English over the phone and face to face
- relax when speaking and listening to English
- use Google to translate, and to correct your English

I am a trainer in EAP and EFL. Should I read this book?

If you are a teacher of English for Academic Purposes or English as a Foreign Language you will learn about all the typical problems that non-native researchers have in the world of academia. You will be able to give your students advice on writing effective emails and getting referees and editors to accept their papers and lots of tips on how to network at conferences.

How is this book organized?

The book is divided into seven parts—see the Contents on page xi. The Contents page also acts as a summary of each chapter.

Each chapter begins with a very quick summary of its importance. This is followed either by advice from experts in writing and communication or by interesting factoids. Most of the comments from the experts were commissioned specifically for this book.

A typical chapter then proceeds with a series of important issues to focus on when you are carrying out a particular task (e.g., writing, telephoning, socializing).

Are the emails and other examples in this book genuine? Are they in correct English?

Yes, all the emails apart from one (3.14) are real emails that have only been modified to ensure the accuracy of the English. The same is true for the referees' reports and replies to these reports—although in some cases you might find this difficult to believe! Unless otherwise stated, all the examples are in correct English.

Glossary

The definitions below of how various terms are used in this book are mine and should not be considered as official definitions.

Anglo	I use this term for convenience to refer to a native speaker of English from the following countries: USA, UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland, and South Africa
British English	There are many varieties of English. For the sake of brevity I use the terms <i>British English</i> and <i>American English</i> to refer to the standard English that is also spoken in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland, and South Africa. The English of other English-speaking countries, such as India and Singapore, is very similar to Anglo English, but has its own peculiarities
interlocutor	The person you are speaking to or the recipient of your email
manuscript	An unpublished written work that is going to be submitted for publication
native speaker of English	Someone born in an Anglo (see definition above) country who speaks English as their first language
non-native speaker of English	Someone whose first language is not English
review / report	A report on a manuscript made by a reviewer or referee
reviewer / referee	These two terms are used indifferently to refer to the person who makes a report on your manuscript

Below are some grammatical terms that I have used.

adjective	a word that describes a noun (e.g., <i>significant, usual</i>)
adverb	a word that describes a verb or appears before an adjective (e.g., <i>significantly, usually</i>)
ambiguity	words and phrases that could be interpreted in more than one way
active	use of a personal pronoun / subject before a verb (e.g., <i>we found that $x = y$</i> rather than <i>it was found that $x = y$</i>)
direct object	in the sentence “I have a book,” the book is the direct object
indirect object	in the sentence “I gave the book to Anna,” book is the direct object, and Anna is the indirect object
infinitive	the root part of the verb (e.g., <i>to learn, to analyze</i>)
-ing form	the part of the verb that ends in <i>-ing</i> and that acts like a noun (e.g., <i>learning, analyzing</i>)
link word, linker	words and expressions that connect phrases and sentences together (e.g., <i>and, moreover, although, despite the fact that</i>)
modal verb	verbs such as <i>can, may, might, could, would, should</i>
noun	words such as <i>althe paper, althe result, althe sample</i>
paragraph	a series of one or more sentences, the last of which ends with a paragraph symbol (¶)
passive	an impersonal way of using verbs (e.g., <i>it was found that $x = y$</i> rather than <i>we found that $x = y$</i>)
phrase	a series of words that make up part of a sentence
redundancy	words and phrases that could be deleted because they add no value for the reader
sentence	a series of words ending with a period (.)

A note on *he*, *she*, and *their*

A frequent problem for writers is the use of a generic pronoun. Occasionally I have used the pronoun *he* to refer to a generic person, sometimes I have used *he / she*, but most often I have used *they*. In modern English *they*, *them*, and *their* can be used as generic pronouns to refer to just one person even though it requires a plural verb.

Other books in this series

This book is a part of series of books to help non-native English-speaking researchers to communicate in English. The other titles are as follows:

English for Presentations at International Conferences

English for Writing Research Papers

English for Research: Usage, Style, and Grammar

English for Academic Research: Grammar Exercises

English for Academic Research: Vocabulary Exercises

English for Academic Research: Writing Exercises

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Part I
Email

Chapter 1

Subject Lines

You will learn how to write a subject line that will

- be easily recognizable and distinguishable from other emails in your recipient's inbox
- prompt your recipient to want to know more and thus to open your mail
- help establish a personal connection with your recipient
- summarize the content of the email so that your recipient will know what to expect even before reading the contents of the mail

It may seem unusual to have an entire chapter dedicated to subject lines, but more than 250 billion are written every day. They are absolutely crucial in motivating your recipient to open your email and to respond quickly, rather than setting it aside for future reading. The subject line of an email is like the title of the paper. If readers do not find the title of a paper interesting, they are unlikely to read the rest of the paper. Likewise, if your subject line is not relevant in some way to the recipient, they may decide simply to delete your email. British journalist Harold Evans once wrote that *writing good headlines is 50 per cent of text editors' skills*. The same could be said of email.

Factoids

- ❖ The first email was sent in 1971 by an engineer called Ray Tomlinson. He sent it to himself and it contained the memorable message: qwertyuiop. However, several other people are also claimed to have sent the first message.
 - ❖ If every email that is sent in one day was printed, each on one sheet of A4, two and a half million trees would have to be cut down. If all the printed emails were piled up on top of each other, they would be more than three times the height of Everest and they would weigh more than the entire human population of Canada. If the printed sheets were laid out they would cover a surface area equivalent to two million football pitches. The cost of printing them would be equivalent to Spain's Gross Domestic Product for an entire year—around 1.4 billion dollars.
 - ❖ Although the most common Internet activity is emailing, a “Digital Life” worldwide survey found that people actually spend more time on social media (4.6 hours per week against 4.4 for email).
 - ❖ The term *drailing* was coined in the mid-2000s and means emailing while drunk.
-

1.1 Write the subject line imagining that you are the recipient

As always when writing emails, you need to think from the recipient's perspective. I lecture in scientific English, and I receive an incredible number of emails from students who use the words *English course* as their subject line. From their point of view, an English course is something very specific in their life—it is only 2 hours a week as opposed to their research and studies which probably take up over 40 hours. So for them, *English course* is very meaningful. But from my point of view, the reverse is true. English courses take up a big part of my week. So the subject line *English course* is not helpful for me at all. A more meaningful subject line would be *Civil Engineers English course* or *English course 10 October*.

So, as with the title of a paper, your subject line needs to be as specific as possible.

It pays to remember that in many cases the recipient is doing you a favor if he / she decides to open your email—your job as the sender is to make this favor worthwhile.

1.2 Combine your subject line with the preview pane

Most email systems display not only the subject line but also make the first few words visible too (either directly as in Gmail or indirectly using a preview pane as in Outlook). It may be useful to use the first words as a means to encourage the recipient to open your email straight away, rather than delaying reading it or deleting it forever.

Using *Dear + title* (e.g., Dr, Professor) + *person's name* as your first words may help to distinguish your email from spam, as spammed mails do not usually incorporate people's titles.

If you adopt this tactic, then it is a good idea to keep your subject line as short as possible. If you can include any key words in the first few words, that too will have a positive influence on the recipient.

1.3 Use the subject line to give your complete message

Some people, me included, use the subject line to give our complete message. This saves the recipient from having to open the email. A typical message to my students might be: *Oct 10 lesson shifted to Oct 17. Usual time and place. EOM.*

EOM stands for *End of message* and signals to the recipient that the complete message is contained within the subject line and that they don't have to open the email.

If you don't write EOM, recipients will not know whether they need or do not need to open the message.

1.4 Consider using a two-part subject line

Some people like to divide their subject line into two parts. The first part contains the context, the second part the details about this context. Here are some examples:

XTC Workshop: postponed till next year

EU project: first draft of review

1.5 Be specific, never vague

A vague subject title such as *Meeting time changed* is guaranteed to annoy most recipients. They want to know which meeting, and when the new time is. Both these details could easily be contained in the subject line.

Project C Kick Off meeting new time 10.30, Tuesday 5 September

This means that a week later when perhaps your recipients have forgotten the revised time of the meeting, they can simply scan their inbox, without actually having to open any mails.

1.6 Include pertinent details for the recipient

If your recipient knows someone who knows you, then it is not a bad idea to put the name of this common acquaintance in the subject line. This alerts the recipient that this is not a spam message. For example, let's imagine you met a certain Professor Huan at a conference. Huan recommended that you write to a colleague of his, Professor Wilkes, for a possible placement in Professor Wilkes lab. Your subject line for your email to Professor Wilkes could be:

Prof Huan. Request for internship by engineering PhD student from University of X

Sometimes it might be useful to include the place where you met the recipient. For example:

XTC Conf. Beijing. Request to receive your paper entitled: *name of paper*

1.7 Examples of subject lines

Here are some more examples of subject lines. The words in italics are words that you would need to change.

Attaching a manuscript for the first time to a journal where you have never published before:

Paper submission: *title of your paper*

Attaching revised manuscript to a journal where your paper has already been accepted subject to revisions:

Manuscript No. *1245/14*: revised version

title of your paper: revised version

Reply to referees' report:

Manuscript No. *5648/AA*—Reply to referees

Request to receive a paper:

Request to receive your paper entitled *title of paper*

Permission to quote from paper / research etc:

Permission to quote your paper entitled *paper title*

Request for placement / internship:

Request for *internship* by *engineering PhD student* from *University of X*

Chapter 2

Beginnings and Endings

You will learn how to

- address someone—whether you know them, don't know them, or don't even know their name
- pay attention to titles (e.g. Mr, Dr, Professor)
- make it clear who your email is intended for
- use standard English phrases rather than translating directly from your own language

First impressions are very important. When you meet someone face to face the first time, you probably take 30 seconds or less to form an impression of this person. After, it will be very difficult for you to change this initial impression. In an email you can form a bad impression within just one second. People's names are incredibly important to them. If you make a mistake in the spelling of someone's name (even by using the wrong accent on a letter), you risk instantly annoying them and they may be less willing to carry out whatever request you are asking them.

If you use standard phrases (see [Chapter 22](#)), rather than literal translations, you will ensure that your email looks professional. You will also minimize the number of mistakes you make in English.

Factoids

Indian English tends to be more formal than British and American English. In emails, Indians often use the word *Sir*, even informally, for example, *Hi Sir; how're you doing*. They also use phrases such as *Thanking you*, *Sincerely yours* and *Respectfully yours*, which are rarely used by British or American academics. Sometimes Indians mix English words with words from their own languages for example, *Yours shubhakankshi*. Young Indians now use phrases such as *C ya soon*; they also adopt SMS lingo: *tc* (take care), *u no* (you know), *4ever* (forever), *4u* (for you), etc.

Chinese students tend to address their professors in this way: Respectful Professor Chang. The word *Respectful* or *Honorable* is the literal translation from a Chinese three-character word (尊敬的). *Dear* is not used as much in mainland Chinese culture as in English / American cultures because it involves intimacy, because to mainland Chinese people “dear” sounds like “darling,” “sweetie,” or “honey.” In mainland China it is generally used between close female friends, girl to girl, and between lovers.

Surnames in Thailand only came into general usage in 1913, when King Rama VI decided that all Thais should have a last name. Every family had to choose their own last name.

2.1 Spell the recipient's name correctly

Make sure your recipient's name is spelt correctly. Think how you feel when you see your own name is misspelled.

Some names include accents. Look at the other's person's signature and cut and paste it into the beginning of your email—that way you will not make any mistakes either in spelling or in use of accents (e.g., è, ö, ñ).

Although their name may contain an accent, they may have decided to abandon accents in emails—so check to see if they use an accent or not.

2.2 Use an appropriate initial salutation and be careful with titles

With Anglos it is generally safe to write any of the following:

Dear Professor Smith,
Your name was given to me by . . .

Dear Dr Smith:
I was wondering whether . . .

Dear John Smith
I am writing to . . .

Dear John
How are things?

Note that you can follow the person's name by a comma (,), by a colon (:), or with no punctuation at all. Whatever system you adopt, the first word of the next line must begin with a capital letter (*Your, How*).

Dr is an accepted abbreviation for “doctor,” that is, someone with a PhD, or a doctor of medicine. It is not used if you only have a normal degree.

The following salutations would generally be considered inappropriate:

Hi Professor Smith—The word *Hi* is very informal and is thus not usually used in association with words such as *Professor* and *Dr*, as these are formal means of address.

Dear Prof Smith—Always use the full form of Professor as the abbreviation Prof might be considered too informal or rude.

Dear Smith—Anglos rarely address each other in emails with just the surname.

If you have had no communication with the person before, then it is always best to use their title. Also, even if Professor Smith replies to your email and signs himself as *John*, it is still best to continue using *Professor Smith* until he says, for instance: *Please feel free to call me John*.

In many other countries people frequently use functional or academic titles instead of names, for example, Mr Engineer, Mrs Lawyer. However, many people in academia tend not to use such titles when writing to each other in English.

2.3 Avoid problems when it is not clear if the recipient is male or female, or which is their surname

It may be difficult to establish someone's gender from their first name. In fact, what perhaps look like female names, may be male names, and vice versa. For example, the Italian names Andrea, Luca, and Nicola; the Russian names Ilya, Nikita, and Foma; and the Finnish names Esa, Pekka, Mika, and Jukka are all male names. The Japanese names Eriko, Yasuko, Aiko, Sachiko, Michiko, and Kanako may look like male names to Western eyes, but are in fact female. Likewise, Kenta, Kota, and Yuta are all male names in Japanese.

If your own name is ambiguous, it is a good idea in first mails to sign yourself in a way that is clear what sex you are, for example, Best regards, Andrea Cavalieri (Mr).

In addition, many English first names seem to have no clear indication of the sex, for example, Saxon, Adair, Chandler, and Chelsea. And some English names can be for both men and women, for example, Jo, Sam, Chris, and Hilary.

In some cases it may not be clear to you which is the person's first and last name, for example, Stewart James. In this particular case, it is useful to remember that Anglos put their first name first, so Stewart will be the first name. However, this is not true of all Europeans. Some Italians, for example, put their surname first (e.g., Ferrari Luigi) and others may have a surname that looks like a first name (e.g., Marco Martina). In the far east, it is usual to put the last name first, for example, Tao Pei Lin (Tao is the surname, Pei Lin is the first name). The best solution is always to write both names, for example, Dear Stewart James, then there can be no mistake. Similarly, avoid Mr, Mrs, Miss, and Ms—they are not frequently used in emails. By not using them you avoid choosing the wrong one.

So, if you are writing to non-academics, be careful how you use the following titles:

- Mr—man (not known if married or not)
- Ms—woman (not known if married or not)
- Mrs—married woman
- Miss—unmarried woman

If you receive an email from a Chinese person, you might be surprised to find that they have an English first name. Most young Chinese people have English nicknames, such as university students or even teachers, basically anyone who has