

Adrian Wallwork

English for Academic Correspondence

Second Edition

English for Academic Research

Series editor

Adrian Wallwork

Pisa

Italy

This series aims to help non-native, English-speaking researchers communicate in English. The books in this series are designed like manuals or user guides to help readers find relevant information quickly, and assimilate it rapidly and effectively. The author has divided each book into short subsections of short paragraphs with many bullet points.

More information about this series at <http://www.springer.com/series/13913>

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English for Academic Correspondence

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 Springer

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English for Academic Research
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Preface

Who is this book for?

This book is part of the *English for Research* series of guides for non-native English academics of all disciplines who work in an international field.

EAP trainers can use this book in conjunction with: *English for Academic Research: A Guide for Teachers*.

What does this book cover? How is it organized?

English for Academic Correspondence covers all the types of email you will need to write in your academic career: emails and letters, both formal and informal, to editors, colleagues, and professors. It also covers how to write and respond to a referee's report, along with some brief suggestions on how to write a research proposal and a research statement.

How are the chapters organized?

Each chapter has the following three-part format:

1) FACTOIDS / WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

In most cases, this section is a brief introduction to the topic of the chapter. Occasionally, the factoids are simply interesting in themselves and have no particular relevance to the chapter in question. However, they can be used by EAP

teachers as warm-ups for their lessons. All the statistics and quotations are genuine, though in some cases I have been unable to verify the original source. The final two chapters do not have this section.

2) WHAT'S THE BUZZ?

This is designed to get you thinking about the topic, through a variety of useful but entertaining exercises. These exercises are designed to be done in class with an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) teacher/trainer, who will provide you with the keys to the exercises. The final part of each *What's the buzz?* section is a brief outline of the contents of the chapter.

3) The rest of each chapter is divided up into short subsections in answer to specific questions.

How should I read this book?

This book is designed to be like a manual or a user guide—you don't need to read it starting from page one. Like a manual it has lots of short subsections and is divided into short paragraphs with many bullet points. This is to help you find what you want quickly and also to assimilate the information as rapidly and as effectively as possible.

You can use the Table of Contents as a checklist of things to remember.

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 your students' papers. In addition, you will find opportunities for generating a lot of stimulating and fun discussions by using the factoids and quotations, along with the *What's the buzz?* exercises.

You can supplement your lessons with the three exercise books (writing, grammar, vocabulary) that are part of this *English for Academic Research* series, plus the teacher's book that contains notes on how to exploit all the books: *English for Academic Research: A Guide for Teachers*.

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

All the emails are based on real emails. I have changed the names of the writers and their institutions, and in some cases I have changed the research topic that the writer refers to in his/her email or letter. The referees' reports and replies to these reports are also genuine - although in some cases you might find this difficult to believe!

Unless otherwise stated, all the examples are in correct English.

Differences from the first edition

There are three main differences from the first edition. Firstly, each chapter now begins with Factoids and a *What's the buzz?* section. Secondly, there are three new chapters (Chapters 7, 8 and 9) on writing cover letters, reference letters and research proposals. Thirdly, Parts 3, 4 and 5 of the original edition (on telephoning, understanding native speakers, and socializing) have been incorporated into a completely new book: *English for Interacting on Campus*. This means that this second edition is entirely focused on correspondence. Adding the new chapters and keeping the old parts would have led to a tome of over 400 pages!

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 Academic Research: A Guide for Teachers

English for Interacting on Campus

English for Academic Research: Grammar, Usage and Style

English for Academic Research: Grammar Exercises

English for Academic Research: Vocabulary Exercises

English for Academic Research: Writing Exercises

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Chapter 1

Subject Lines

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 What's the buzz?

- 1) Look at your Inbox in your email account. Analyse 10-20 subject lines and decide some criteria for judging how effective the subject lines are. Compare your criteria with a colleague's.
- 2) Look in your Spam. Again, analyse some of the subject lines (without opening the mail itself!). What style do most of them have in common? How do you know that they are spam?
- 3) Finally, look at some of the subject lines that you have written. Do they match your criteria from Exercise 1? In some cases, might your recipient have thought that the email was spam?

It may seem unusual to have an entire chapter dedicated to subject lines, but more than 250 billion are written every day. Subject lines are 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 the subject line of an email.

In this chapter 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

1.2 Write the subject line imagining that you are the recipient

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.

In many cases the recipient will be doing you a favor if he / she decides to open your email—your job as the sender is to make this favor worthwhile.

1.3 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. 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.

1.4 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.

1.5 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

1.6 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.

1.7 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*

1.8 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

Salutations

What the experts say

Within the academic world, and even in an informal society such as that in North America, addressing academics using titles such as Dr and Professor, may make the recipient more willing to help you. Using titles may also help to differentiate you from those students whose emails resemble text messages to friends rather than requests to top academics. You may also get a more successful outcome to an email request if you use some apologetic or slightly deferential language such as “Sorry to bother you but ...”, “I wonder if you could ...”, “I know you must be very busy but ...”.

*David Morand, Professor of Management, School of Business Administration
Pennsylvania State University—Harrisburg*

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.

Tarun Huria, Mechanical Engineer, Indian Railways

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.

Ting Zheng, teacher

2.1 What's the buzz?

Make a list of typical salutations in your language that are used at the beginnings and endings of emails.

- 1) How many of these salutations have a literal translation into English?
- 2) Do you know the English equivalents for the ones that don't have a literal translation?
- 3) With regard to questions 1 and 2, do you know the formal and informal versions in English of the phrases you have written down?
- 4) Imagine you were going to write to a researcher called Saxon Baines, with whom you have had no previous contact. Which of the following beginnings would you use and why? a) *Dear Saxon* b) *Dear Baines* c) *Dear Doctor Baines* d) *Dear Mr Baines* e) *Dear Saxon Baines*
- 5) Now think about how you would address this researcher: Tao Pei Lin.

First impressions are very important. When you meet someone face to face for the first time, you probably take 30 seconds or less to form an impression of this person. Research has proved that 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 14), rather than literal translations, you will ensure that your email looks professional. You will also minimize the number of mistakes you make in English.

In this chapter 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

2.2 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.

2.3 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.