

PROGRAMMING TO WIN

by John Silliman Dodge



Dodge's E-mail Rules Of Thumb

During the mid-90's, I took a four-year sabbatical from radio to work in the tech sector because I predicted, accurately it turns out now, that technology would revolutionize the media. I worked for **Microsoft** among others, and what I recall most vividly about my time spent in Redmond was the silence. No hallway conversations, no ringing telephones, just the low hum of hard drives and the incessant tap-tap-tapping of keyboards. Everybody sending e-mail to the guy next door.

When I first heard the term, it sounded just a little too precious and futuristic. Oh, I get it, "electronic mail." But then I received my first reply one minute after sending the message and Boom! Based on instant gratification alone, I knew this would be big. Ten years later this nifty trick from the mid-90s has become a primary mode of communication.

E-mail may be the biggest thing ever, but it's also a big double-edged sword. Now we're drowning in the stuff. We're suffering an information pandemic. We're daily dependent upon a tool we really don't know how to use all that well. But at least the demand for good writing is back. We nearly lost it there for a while.

In the days before telephones and television, people read books and expressed themselves through writing letters, diaries, and journals. The mailman visited a couple of times a day. Then came electronic media and we began our gradual slouch toward illiteracy. But the nearly universal adoption of e-mail has placed renewed emphasis on the importance of good writing skills to your career. Today, the person who knows how to express himself clearly, succinctly, assertively, creatively — usually wins. And if you don't have these skills, everybody knows about it because everybody reads your mail every day.

If we're going to lean so heavily on this tool, let's learn to master it. Here are a dozen "rules" for efficient and effective e-mailing I've picked up while cruising the Infobahn, and I offer these useful tips for your review. Let's call them *Dodge's E-mail Rules Of Thumb*:

Subject Please?: What's our topic here? Clear and compelling subject lines help your reader quickly determine what's most important, which of his 75 different messages he needs to view first. Let's see, should I open the one called "Hey" or the one called "Budgets Due by 5 p.m. Today." Hmm. And should your topic drift over the course of an e-mail exchange, please change the subject line. Otherwise you'll be talking about an important station promotion while your subject line still reads "King Tut Exhibit."

Get It Up Front: Don't bury the important points of your message three lines deep in paragraph three. Readers today have a form of ADD induced by communication overload, so make your point and make it early. Often times, between a compelling subject line and the first two short sentences, a reader using the preview function doesn't

even have to open your message to know what it means and what to do about it. That's effective.

Less Is More: Like fewer commercials, fewer words make for less clutter and greater impact. So feel free to write all you like, just be sure you trash about three-quarters of it before you hit Send. The result will always be punchier, more powerful, and more quickly read and responded to. Should your e-mail scroll longer than a page, make a call or go face to face.

Never Hit Send Until: Ever hit Send only to realize that you misspelled someone's name or made a major grammatical error? Proofreading takes an extra minute, but it can save a lot of embarrassment and confusion down the line. What seems perfectly clear to you may or may not read so clearly to others. You want your message to be interpreted in one way and one way only—exactly how you meant it. Also, a rereading gives you a chance to include that attachment you forgot to attach. Slow down, reread, then hit Send.

E-mail Is Forever: Lawyers tell you "never write a letter and never throw one away." That's because they deal in incriminating evidence. But we need to communicate with each other. Just remember that e-mail may feel private, but it's a very public channel. Your messages probably shouldn't contain material you wouldn't want to see splashed all over the *New York Times*. And leave the flames for the backyard barbecue. What you feel in the heat of the moment may pass in time, but once your words are committed to digits, you're history.

Dave Who?: If you are like me, you have—and I swear—35 different Dave's in your address book. Which Dave are we talking to here? It makes you look careless to send a message to Dave A that you meant to send to Dave B. Not just careless but embarrassing, particularly if you're telling Dave B what a knucklehead Dave A is. Be certain your recipient is the person you have in mind.

The Power Of The Face: We sometimes use e-mail as a substitute for direct, personal communication. Or worse, we use it as a distancing device when we have a difficult issue to resolve with an individual. As a leader, your primary responsibility is to manage and motivate your people. So when touchy matters arise, or when personal persuasion is required, don't let e-mail stand in your way. Step away from the computer and make a call or pay a visit.

Work Now, Play Later: We're pretty busy here, right? Everyone working pretty hard? Jokes, funnies, gossip, smiley faces, emoticons, pie-in-the-face videos, all this wonderful stuff has its rightful place. It's called *the weekend*.

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CC = CYA: Don't copy someone on a message unless they absolutely have to see the thread. And please don't copy your boss on everything you do. You think it makes you appear more productive or effective, but what you're really doing is wasting his or her time following the boring details of all your conversations.

Reply All: The evil twin of CC. Before you automatically hit *Reply to All*, ask yourself, "Who needs to know?" It's usually a much smaller list than you think. Be courteous and respect people's time.

Word Power Rules: Take away body language, which accounts for close to 90 percent of the important cues we use in our personal communication, and you place 100 percent of the responsibility on the 10 percent that remains—the words. Clearly, we need to pick and choose those words more carefully than we do. All those subtle, ironic, sarcastic, absurd things we say which work so well with the accompanying twinkle of the eye can easily get lost in translation.

Spell Czech: Spelling and grammar checkers let you commit unbelievably stupid errors. Use these tools but don't depend on them. There's simply no shortcut to being your own proofreader. I fre-

quently print out longer messages or articles (like this one) because I catch things on paper that I miss on screen.

We've hit the highlights with these dozen tips for more effective e-mail communication, so let's recap. Remember that e-mail works best when it's just one among many communication tools. Don't try to lead or persuade or argue or otherwise manage your relationships with it. For those scenarios, you need your complete tool kit. The more commonplace e-mail becomes, the more important good writing skills become. We can work on that. And the more universal e-mail becomes, the more important face time becomes. Remember that if you forget everything else.

John Silliman Dodge is a radio Swiss Army Knife. He's announced, produced and programmed formats from metal to kids to classical. John pioneered the modern classical approach at WCRB/Boston. Today he gives interactive training workshops and consults radio stations on announcer performance and staff motivation. John also announces for Sirius Satellite Radio. Email john@sillimandodge.com or visit www.sillimandodge.com.

Editor's Note: In the June 10, 2005 At Issue titled, *The Premature Death of HD Radio?*, Bob Rivers was listed as working at KISW/Seattle. He actually works at KZOK/Seattle. FMQB regrets the error.



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