For most of us, sending and receiving email is simple and fun. We use it to communicate with friends and family and to converse with our contemporaries in an informal manner. But while we may be unguarded in our tone when we email friends, a professional tone should be maintained when communicating with prospective employers.

Email is a powerful tool in the hands of a knowledgeable job-seeker. Use it wisely and you will shine. Use it improperly, however, and you’ll brand yourself as immature and unprofessional. Dr. Sherry Reasbeck, a San Diego-based career counselor, warns that some email mistakes leave a bad impression. “It’s irritating when the writer doesn’t stay on topic or just rambles,” says Reasbeck. “Try to succinctly get your point across then end the email.”

Be aware that electronic mail is often the preferred method of communication between job-seeker and employer. There are general guidelines that should be followed when emailing cover letters, thank-you notes and replies to various requests for information. Apply the following advice to every email you write:

• Use a meaningful subject header for your email – one that is appropriate to the topic.
• Always be professional and businesslike in your correspondence. Address the recipient as Mr., Ms., or Mrs. and always verify the correct spelling of the recipient’s name.
• Be brief in your communications. Don’t overload the employer with lots of questions in your email.
• Do not use strange fonts, wallpapers or multicolored backgrounds.
• Sign your email with your full name.
• Avoid using slang.
• Be sure to proofread and spell-check your email before sending it.

Neal Murray, director of the career services center at the University of California, San Diego, sees a lot of emails from job-seekers. “You’d be amazed at the number of emails I receive that have spelling errors, grammatical errors, formatting errors – emails that are too informal in tone or just poorly written,” says Murray. Such emails can send the message that you are unprofessional or unqualified.

When you’re dealing with employers, there is no such thing as an inconsequential communication. Your emails say far more about you than you might realize, and it is important to always present a polished, professional image – even if you are just emailing your phone number and a time when you can be contacted. If you are sloppy and careless, a seemingly trivial communication will stick out like a sore thumb.

THANK-YOU NOTES
If you’ve had an interview with a prospective employer, a thank-you note is a good way to express your appreciation. The note can be emailed a day or two after your interview and only needs to be a few sentences long, as in the following:

Dear Ms. Jones:

I just wanted to send a quick note to thank you for yesterday’s interview. The position we discussed is exactly what I’ve been looking for, and I feel that I will be able to make a positive contribution to your organization. I appreciate the opportunity to be considered for employment at XYZ Corporation. Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you need further information.

Sincerely,

John Doe

Remember, a thank-you note is just that – a simple way to say thank you. In the business world, even these brief notes need to be handled with care.

COVER LETTERS
A well-crafted cover letter can help “sell” you to an employer. It should accomplish three main things:

1. Introduce yourself to the employer. If you are a recent college graduate, mention your major and how it would apply to the job you are seeking. Discuss the organizations/extracurricular activities you were involved in and the part-time jobs you held while a student, even if they might seem trivial to you. Chances are, you probably picked up some transferable skills that you will be able to use in the work world.

2. Sell yourself. Briefly state your education and the skills that will benefit the employer. Don’t go into a lot of detail here – that’s what your resume is for – but give the employer a sense of your strengths and talents.

3. Request further action. This is where you request the next step, such as an appointment or a phone conversation. Be polite but sincere in your desire for further action.

Tips
In addition to the guidelines stated above, here are a few tips to keep in mind: Make sure you spell the recipient’s name correctly. If the person uses initials such as J.A. Smith and you are not certain of the individual’s gender, then
begin the email: “Dear J.A. Smith.” Stick to a standard font like Times New Roman, 12-point. Keep your email brief and businesslike. Proofread everything you write before sending it.

While a well-crafted email may not be solely responsible for getting you your dream job, rest assured that an email full of errors will result in your being overlooked. Use these email guidelines and you will give yourself an advantage over other job-seekers who are unaware of how to professionally converse through email.

ELECTRONIC RESUMES
In today’s Internet-driven world, having an electronic resume – one that can be easily emailed – is imperative for job-seekers.

Your resume is your introduction to employers and should be a succinct, one-page summary of your education, skills, accomplishments and work history. Remember, first impressions are important. If you present yourself in an organized and interesting way, you’ll have an advantage over someone who may be equally qualified for the job but has a sloppy, error-filled resume.

File Formats
It is almost always preferable to send your resume as an attachment to an email. This preserves the formatting you have chosen to highlight your skills. There are some suggestions regarding the attachment though.

• The most common formats preferred by business are Microsoft Word (.doc) or Adobe (.pdf). Most employers can open and view these formats.

• Because there are usually multiple versions of the most popular word processing software in use in the employer community at any given time, use the version just before the most recent version. This ensures the recipient will be able to open the document.

• Make sure to check the attachment with an up-to-date anti-virus application. Most employers use software to scan attachments for viruses and they will not open a file that is infected.

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