

2 SUBJECT LINES

2.1 Compose the subject line from the recipient's perspective

A good subject line should be written from the recipient's perspective

- be pertinent to the recipient (not just to you)
- encourage the recipient to open the mail itself
- indicate to the recipient whether he / she needs to open it immediately or later
- easily searchable / retrievable by the recipient
- short
- give a very clear indication of the actual message

Also, remember that the email you have written may then become part of a long chain, possibly with multiple recipients. If possible, choose a subject line that will not need to be changed (because it is not sufficiently pertinent) at some point later in the chain.

2.2 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. It may be useful to use the first words as a means to encourage the recipient to open your email straight away.

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.

2.3 Include name of a mutual third party in the subject line (and in cc) in a mail to a new contact

Imagine you are writing to a totally new contact and that this contact knows someone who knows you. In such cases, 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 Jo Bloggs at a trade fair and you subsequently became connected on LinkedIn. Bloggs recommended that you write to a colleague of his, Andrea Wilkes (who does not know you), for a possible interview at Wilkes' company. Your subject line for your email to Andrea Wilkes could be:

Jo Bloggs. Request for interview for position as software analyst

From the subject line, Andrea knows that the message is not spam, and by seeing the name of someone who is familiar to her (Jo Bloggs) she will be motivated to open the email. Andrea will be further motivated to open your email if she sees that Jo Bloggs is in cc.

2.4 Make it clear if your mail only requires very limited effort on the part of the recipient

Many people don't open an email on the basis that it will require time on their part to answer the mail. However, if you can make it clear in the subject line that in fact no effort will be required other than reading a couple of lines of text and then giving a simple yes / no answer, then your recipient is more likely to open the mail and respond. For example:

Two minutes of your time: Could you check the attached figures? Thanks.

Quick favor: Can you update the sales figures on the attached Excel file?

2.5 Be specific, never vague

A vague subject title such as *Meeting time changed* may annoy many 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.

2.6 Consider using a two-part subject line

You can split your subject line into two parts. The first part contains the context, the second part the details about this context. Here are two examples:

XYZ meeting: new time 10.00

Annual review: 10 Nov deadline approaching

2.7 Ensure that your subject line is not spam friendly

Very generic subject lines often cause an email to end up in the spam. This is particularly true if they are combined with a generic salutation at the beginning of the email. Below is an example of a mail from a teacher in Iran that was intended specifically for me, but in fact was marked as spam by Gmail.

Subject line: kindly appreciate your help

Dear sir,

I'm an English teacher and for a writing course I have been asked to teach your precious book on writing papers (English for Writing Papers). I deeply appreciate your kindness if you could guide how I can teach this book.

The subject line above is typical of thousands of spam mails that attempt to get people to make illegal bank transfers. Moreover, native English speakers do not begin an email with *Dear Sir*. Interestingly, the email address of the sender was an academic one (@alumni.ut.ac.ir), which highlights that Gmail focuses on the text of the mail rather than the address of the sender.

A more effective email that would not have ended up in my trash, would be:

Subject line: English for Writing Papers – help with methodology

Dear Adrian Wallwork,

I'm an English teacher and ...

The revised version above has

- a clear specific subject line
- a salutation that includes my name

Both these factors are crucial in ensuring your email does not go in the recipient's spam.

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