

How to Communicate More Graciously - and Effectively - in an Electronic World: or, *A Common Sense Guide to Email Etiquette*

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Introduction

Etiquette – in my opinion* – is essentially a combination of common sense, respect and efficiency.

It's not rules, or laws, or musts and must-nots. It's simple, common sense practices that make my life easier, more graceful and smooth. When I write emails using common sense, respect and efficiency, I feel better, I only have to do things once, and I get what I want.

Whoever I'm emailing also has a great experience ... *particularly* if they never even notice. As my father says about airplane flights, "an uneventful flight is the best kind of flight." I'll say the same is true about communication. When it's smooth and clean and easy and direct, and everyone understands what's happening, what to expect and who is responsible for various tasks, it's "uneventful" ... and that's a good thing.

I don't use etiquette to get praise, to be uppity or to better than someone else. I use it to get results.

Quite frankly, I will admit that I don't always exhibit the best behavior, the most respectful dialogue (oral or written) or the most gracious rapport, and perhaps that's why the concepts I'll share with you here will be more meaningful and real. They're not commandments from Ms. Perfect ... they're simple guidelines which I'm doing my best to live by as well.

So, let's begin ...

*Etiquette is essentially a
combination of common sense,
respect and efficiency.*

* Yes, I know, IMO.

Chapter 1

ALL CAPS SUCK!

First, I'm going to dispel an email myth. Though I will put my two cents in and agree with everyone else that ALL CAPS SUCK! I do not agree that it's tantamount to "shouting." There's a very real reason why ALL CAPS SUCK!, and it's this:

Reading is accomplished first and foremost by recognizing shapes.

When the brain is decoding the word HELP in all caps, it sort of has to go, "Hmmm ... H-E-L-P spells *help*. (It does this very quickly, of course). However, when it sees the word "help" in lower case, it does something like this: "Ahah! I know that shape-word! Look, the *h* has a line that goes up and a downward arch, the *e* has a little curly loop and tail" ... and so on. Once the brain recognizes the shape-word created from h-e-l-p, it stores that shape and the meaning of the word so that future sightings of this shape-word are automatically recalled ... *very, very, very* quickly.

So, that, folks, is the simple reason why ALL CAPS SUCK! They are difficult to read.

And, as far as I'm concerned, it's is the *only* rule for email etiquette. Everything else is circumstance, common sense and personal preference.

If you currently type in an all-cap style, at least switch to all lower case. (See Chapter 11 for ways to make it work for you.)

There is only one rule for email communication: No ALL CAPS.

Chapter 2

**Know Your Audience ...
Then Everything Else is Common Sense**

Before getting stuck on rules and “shoulds,” know with whom you’re dealing, what their “email universe” is like and go from there.

Sending an interesting website link to my technically adept husband in the other room is different than sending a formal proposal to a prospect which is different than sending an email to my dear mother whose use of the computer is limited to signing on to AOL through her dial-up connection once or twice a week.

Frankly, an all lower case text message with “hey, babe” in the subject line and a smiley face at the end of the email are just fine for my husband. However, I’ll read and re-read an email to a prospect and make sure that my subject line will prompt the receiver to open my message. And with my mom, I’ll forgo sending attachments of any kind and get information to her in another format, if required.

Just as my phone conversations differ depending on my relationship with the person to whom I am speaking, so too do my emails differ. My style, my tone and my formatting choices are tailored to communicate effectively ...

Before writing an email, consider these points:

- *What is my relationship with this person?*
- *What type of internet connection do they most commonly use? Dial-up, cable or wireless PDA?*
- *Where are they receiving the message? At home? At work? On the road?*
- *What is the intent of my message?*

Remember, the guideline is to Know Your Audience first. Once you’ve answered some basic questions, the rest is mostly common sense.

*First understand to whom you’re
writing, where this person gets her
email, and what you want
to communicate ... then the rest
is common sense.*

Chapter 3

The Joys – And Horrors – of Speedy Email ... Or, Only Write Emails When You're Feeling Good

Most folks, however much they love the speed and efficiency of email, have had their share of personal horror stories with emails written from a place of anger, frustration, irritation, aggravation, insult, misunderstanding and/or rage.

I've experienced the really icky version of replying angrily to an email, only to discover that the REPLY TO person was the one about whom I was complaining. Ouch!

And shooting off an angry email while upset about something and regretting it horribly afterward.

And writing something unkind about someone and having it get back to them.

Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!

The guideline here: When you feel your fingers flying furiously across the keyboard, steam puffing out of your ears and spit coming out of your mouth in the place of intelligible words, WAIT! Calm down. Re-read the email. Perhaps you misunderstood the person. Perhaps *they* are having a bad day. Perhaps a phone call will help clear things up.

An email written from a shaky emotional place will only cause more problems, so hold your horses if you're feeling venomous.

Emails create permanent records of your words. Unlike a snippy conversation which is often forgotten soon afterward, emails stay around ... and can be forwarded to others, *verbatim*. And that can really suck.

*When you feel your fingers flying
furiously across the keyboard,
WAIT! Calm down.*

Chapter 4

Be Gentle with Your Words

... Or How to Communicate Without Body Language, Eye Contact and Tone

When I'm anxious or frustrated, I can transform into one of the world's greatest speed demons.

I get terse. I get impatient. I get irritated. And that combined with email is a disaster.

Short, concise, clear and direct communication is very good. Terse is not.

My husband's first language isn't English, yet he writes with a gentleness, friendliness and candor that astounds me. I have effectively written millions – perhaps billions – of words in English, yet one terse sentence can have the power of a dagger.

When possible, read your emails aloud. Listen to your tone. Do *you* feel good when you read your words? (Not the "good" feeling from pride, ego or righteousness, but a good stemming from kindness, gentleness and clarity.)

If the email you're writing is about a sensitive subject and you're feeling out of sorts, ask for help from a neutral party. If you're like most people, the last thing on your wish list is a war of words with a colleague, friend or vendor.

*When possible, read your emails
aloud. Listen to your tone.*

Chapter 5

Create Meaningful Subject Lines

Though I'm not one of them, rumor has it there are people who get 100+ emails a day. (By the way, if you're one of these people, be sure to read Chapter 16 thoroughly.)

Meaningful subject lines help your recipient prioritize their incoming emails and decide which ones require immediate attention.

Also, many people (and you should start including yourself in this group if you haven't already) use their SENT box and IN box as record-keeping tools. Effective, clear email subject lines will help both you and your recipients track, record and find information in old emails more quickly.

And since you don't know what your recipient's in-box looks like, how organized they are, how well they prioritize their day or how they're feeling at the moment, a clear subject line will do wonders for getting your email answered more quickly.

Clearly, subject lines such as *hi* or *meeting* or *proposal* won't stand out as urgent to your recipient, and may even irritate them mildly for being so darn vague.

Write subject lines relevant to the email content. For example:

- *Mtg re accounting procedures on Tues at 11:15*
- *Proposal to remediate contaminated soil at White City Plant*
- *"Learn2Speak Hungarian" sales letter attached, pls review by Thurs.*

Also, after you've been emailing back and forth with someone and the subject of the original email has been answered and the core message focus has shifted, change the subject line or start a new email. This will help all parties with priority, clarity and record-keeping.

If you're a consultant and bill clients for your time, consider putting a few letters as client initials in the front of each subject line, such as *VH: photo shoot at the Kennedy Center*. This way you'll be able to review your emails at the end of your billing cycle and may remember more of the activities – and time – involved in accomplishing specific projects ... and legitimately put more money in your pocket.

Chapter 6

Choose Your Recipients Intelligently and Conservatively

Though I have managed to avoid working at large corporations, I've heard the groans and moans of people who do ... and I've heard absurd stories of employees sending emails to their entire department saying things along the lines of "I'll be out of the office at a dentist appointment this afternoon from 1:00 - 2:30."

Whoop-dee-doo. So what. And, who cares?

Carefully consider who must be included as a direct, CC or BCC recipient, and communicate concisely and effectively at all times for all occasions. Then — when you really have something important to say — you're much more likely to get people to read your emails. Develop a reputation for being a cavalier emailer and you're likely to be ignored and belittled.

If you want your boss to know the final results of a project, email her the final report or consider a weekly summary email ... but don't CC her on every single email along the way. Check your emotions and your reasons. Are you looking for praise and recognition? If so (and you're not abnormal if you are), do it intelligently and respectfully by communicating conservatively while "in process" on a project.

Your reputation as a conscientious, capable professional will be stronger if you use discretion in choosing your email recipients.

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Chapter 7

Be Concise and Directly Ask for What You Want

There are those who have no problem being straight and direct. And then there are those who – for cultural, personal or other reasons – really have a hard time with this concept.

One of the kindest things that you can do in an email is to be specific, upfront and direct; let your recipient know what you want from them. Is the email simply to inform them of something and keep them in the loop? Do you want specific information from them? Do you want an answer by a certain date? Do you want feedback? Or confirmation that they'll be at a meeting?

ASK!

I've had the fortune to work with a master communicator who juggles many clients and subcontractors at all times. Her emails are so clear because she can't afford the time and effort to communicate twice. When she includes more than one recipient on the email list, she often identifies which part of the message is for each person, such as –

RGM: Wed., Jan. 26 is fine with me, if it works for the others. Can we do the cultural grant meeting at 8:30, followed by the website meeting at 10 a.m.?

J2: You would be in the website meeting only. Can you make it? Please confirm.

I get an email. I know what to do. That's good business manners. And everyone wins. Emails don't languish in the inbox while the recipient wonders what to do and the sender gets ticked because she hasn't received a response.

One of the kindest things that you can do in an email is to be specific, upfront and let your recipient know what you want from them.

Chapter 8

Answer Quickly and Thoroughly

I don't know about you, but when I send out a request for information by email, I consider it "off my plate" and in the other person's court, so to speak.

So when I request information and I don't get an answer (particularly from large corporations who foolishly allow customers to contact them via email and then don't even deign to respond!) I get a little miffed ... if you can't already tell.

Email is quick. It's speedy. It takes seconds or minutes to send, and people very often want a quick answer.

If you're swamped, consider sending a quick reply email to the sender, informing them that you're busy and you'll get back to them tomorrow, in a few days ... whatever. If you don't understand what they want from you, gently ask them if the email was just informational or if the sender requires action from you.

But don't let messages sit in your inbox unanswered for ages. No parties involved will be pleased. You'll feel bogged down. The sender will feel ignored, and in general, it ain't a good scene.

Review the message to which you're responding thoroughly to see if you've answered all the points; otherwise, you're just going to have to deal with it again ... and again. Do it once - correctly, and it's done. Off your plate. *Ta-dah!*

If you don't understand what they want from you, gently ask them if the email was just informational or if the sender requires action from you.

Chapter 9

Replies, Me Toos & Other Such Miscellany

Ever get an email from an AOL user who waited three days to respond and then replied by simply typing “yes” – or something along those lines – in the message box?

Yes?

Yes what?

Meanwhile, I’m thinking, “Eegads! I wrote that email days ago. I don’t even remember what I wrote!”

If you’re an AOL user – in particular, please make sure your defaults are set to include the message text to which you are replying.

For everyone else, when replying – especially to emails that have been going back and forth and here and there – you can delete signatures, “confidentiality notices” and excess text so that the emails are succinct and easier to read.

And, please, for your own dignity and self-respect, avoid – regardless of the temptation – the ME TOO! response. Those are the emails where you add nothing of value, fill up people’s inboxes with irrelevant messages and basically attract a bunch of “*hmph!*” responses from friends and colleagues.

Pay attention, as well, to whom you are replying. Some people – *oddly!* – appear to have their defaults (or the default in their ego) set to REPLY TO ALL. If you’re one of these people, cease and desist of this activity immediately. You’re driving everyone nuts. Only reply to a group email when you’re contributing (which is a very different concept from “commenting”) and only reply to those for whom your input is relevant.

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input is relevant.*

Chapter 10

Length is Important ... As is Width and Space

Find yourself writing your own version of *War & Peace* in the email message text box? Stop now. Copy the text into a Word document (or whatever word processing program you use) and create a real document.

Then, in the email message box, write a summary paragraph of the attached document and perhaps some specific action items for the recipients.

Think of emails as conversational, light and quick communication, and you'll be a much more effective communicator. Think of them as a way to avoid creating formal documents and you'll irritate your recipients. Truthfully, it's just harder to read on screen than it is on paper. So the more you want someone to give their full attention to your words, the more you may wish to consider putting long documents into – well, documents!

As well, if you can't figure it out yourself, ask a friendly techno-genius to help you adjust the line length of your emails so that the text doesn't go across the entire screen. Just as newspapers and magazines publish text in short columns to enhance readability, you might wish to consider shortening the length of your email lines.

Write short sentences and paragraphs.

And use the ENTER key to create space between paragraphs. The more quickly your recipient can scan your email, the more likely you are to get a quick response ... from an appreciative reader, as well.

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Chapter 11

How to Speak Fluent Email-ese, ... Or would that be Email-ish?

No, this section is not about *lol*, *imo*, *btw* and other acronyms more suitable to tweenagers IMing cryptic messages to each other.

And, other than ALL CAPS SUCK, there really aren't any rules which must be obeyed in learning to write fluent Email-ish. Though there are some simple methods for adding tone and inflection to email messages, which are – by nature – a rather flat, two-dimensional form of communication.

Personally, for friendly communication – and that includes clients with whom I have an ongoing relationship – I like the all lower case approach. I started doing this almost 10 years ago when the SHIFT key on my keyboard stuck, and it was almost impossible to get a capitalized letter out of the darn thing.

In a matter of days, I went from being a “Certified Grammar Goddess” – as stated on my business card – to loving this new-found conversational style of writing.

You may disagree. You may be appalled. If so, skip this section and keep on typing Real Sentences.

But if you find yourself leaning toward the lower-case version of typing, here are some tips –

- Use all caps for a word or two to SHOW EMPHASIS ... use this feature *very* conservatively.
- Keep your sentences much shorter than if you were typing formal sentences.
- String together sentence fragments with ellipses (*three dots with a space before and a space after*) ... and keep your tone conversational.
- Use color, bold and italics conservatively – if at all – and know that these formatting features may be stripped out of some people's email messages, so don't rely on them to convey tone or importance.
- Use bullets and indents to generate focus on a particularly important part of your message.
- Use grammar creatively for tone ... you're mimicking a conversation to the best of your ability. Use dashes. And ellipses. Put breaks between lines.
- Do not use email shorthand and excessively conversational style, such as *r u finished with the report?* and *btw, imho, u da bomb! ... lol!!!!*

And most importantly, if you do go the lower-case, minimal-punctuation route, pay *extra* attention to your spelling and writing. Conversational style writing does not make sloppiness acceptable; quite the opposite, I would argue.

Before getting too excited about this License to Type in Lower Case, remember one of the primary principles of email communication: *Know Your Audience!* You have to decide – based on many factors – what type of approach and communication style you want for each email you send.

Then use common sense.

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not make sloppiness acceptable;
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Chapter 12

Signatures and Disclaimers: They're Not "The Message," so Keep Them in Proportion

"My goodness!" I said to myself when I read an email from an associate whose name must have been in 30-point type in his signature. "... *as if* I couldn't figure out who sent the email!"

"Signatures" – those automatically inserted name, title, address, etc. lines at the end of some people's messages – are effective and can save you and your recipient time. But do create them conservatively and intelligently.

Are most of your outgoing emails ...

- Within your company? Then perhaps just your name, title/department and phone extension are all that's required.
- To friends and family? Try just your name and perhaps a short, inspiring quote – or no signature at all. (They do know who you are and how to reach you, after all.)
- To prospects and customers? Consider including your name, phone number, company website and the company tagline or mission statement.

There is no rule that says a signature must include all your contact information. In some programs, you can create multiple signatures for different purposes. In Outlook Express, for example, you can do this under Tools/Options/Signature.

Signatures and disclaimers are not key components of your email, so make them "quieter" and in the background. A company tag line or mission statement at the end in color and/or italics is fine ... but don't go overboard.

I occasionally get emails from a woman whose disclaimer is in 12-pt., bold blue text. As is her signature. I get classic emails from her – just one or two lines of info – and then this huge, whopping signature/disclaimer thing. Where do you think my attention goes when her emails come in? I don't want to look at it, but my brain says "Ooh, this must be important." It distracts me.

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so make them "quieter" and in
the background.*

Chapter 13

A DIY Test for Emailing Jokes ... and Pass-This-Along – or Die a Terrible Death – Chain Letters

To those of you with a propensity for forwarding jokes, “feel good” chain letters about what the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa or Einstein supposedly said, it is genuinely offensive to receive such messages when I find my email address buried in a list of 40 or 50 names.

First, you’ve just broadcast my email address without my permission. Second, if you really want to share a joke, or words of wisdom that touched you, or a sob story about some boy with an incurable disease who wants his email to go around the world before he dies, then call me. Let me hear the sincerity in your words.

As a matter of courtesy, if you insist on sending endless email jokes, despite the silent, emailed or spoken pleas of your friends, at least use the BCC (blind copy) feature.

The Do-It-Yourself Test Kit for knowing if an email joke, “feel good chain letter” or photo is acceptable to pass along is this: Each time you feel compelled to instantly send along such an “important email” to 30 or so of your closest and not-so-closest friends, ask yourself if you would either 1) genuinely call each potential recipient and share the tip, tidbit of wisdom or “get rich quick” opportunity or 2) if you would print the photos you’re about to email *en masse* and mail them to each person. If your answer is “Nah ... I wouldn’t bother,” then for goodness’ sake, don’t email them!

And don’t send instant cures for how to overcome a heart attack or terrible news about a spider that lives in public toilets and causes death within 48 hours of a bite, or whatever. If something feels real and genuine, look it up first on one of the many hoax-buster websites such as www.nerdherd.com/hoaxes/hoaxBustersResources.php.

The Do-It-Yourself Test Kit for knowing if an email joke is acceptable to pass along is this: Would you call the intended email recipients and verbally tell them the joke? If not, don’t send it.

Chapter 14

ListSers, Message Boards, IMs and Other Such Modern Oddities

There isn't much to say on this chapter.

Not that there aren't millions (yes, I mean that literally, not figuratively) of daily email etiquette transgressions in these arenas, but, precisely, because there are so many.

I've tried, truly, to use these forums and tools. I've been curious about a subject ... delighted to have found a community with a common interest ... excited to have the opportunity for intelligent, online discussions on topics of particular interest to me.

And I have given up, completely.

No sooner do I find a fascinating ListServ do I discover that its messages are primarily populated by a few bored, lonely, self-focused individuals who post *ad nauseum* about things irrelevant to the group's focus.

Common sense dictates that if you want to communicate something to only to one individual on a Message Board, do it privately.

Allow me to provide a perspective on Instant Messaging, or IMing (pronounced I-M-ing), which may help you to use IMs more effectively.

If I IM someone because I'm bored and I want a "lift," then I'm coming into someone's territory with nothing to add and with the intent to *take*. (I know all about this concept from my own challenges in personal relationships.) IMs such as "*wassup?*" or "*hi*" are generally in the "sucking" camp.

When there is a reason for the communication – such as an IM requesting or sending specific, time-sensitive information – it is an appropriate use of the tool. Both parties understand, agree to and benefit from the exchange of information.

So, I have little advice on this subject other than, if you do use these forums and methods, keep your postings relevant, avoid Me-Too responses, and IM only when you're giving or specifically requesting information.

Personally, I'm an avid emailer, and I manage to live quite efficiently without all of these "modern oddities."

When there is a reason for the communication – such as an IM requesting or sending specific, time-sensitive information – it is an appropriate use of the tool.

Chapter 15

Miscellaneous Tips That Don't Justify a Chapter Each

When establishing a new relationship with a customer or prospect, ask them how they like to conduct their primary communication. Do they like email (hopefully, yes)? Or are they a phone conversation type of gal? Surprisingly, some employees don't have personal email accounts and may prefer a phone call or faxed letter. Ask.

Never, ever give your password out to anyone via email, regardless of how they've maneuvered the FROM email to make it look legitimate, or how they designed a message and stolen a company's logo, or how sincere and urgent their request for your password is. It's a scam ... every time. And it could end up costing you money, your privacy and a headache or two.

Only use the priority flag on emails when the message truly is a priority. (Sounds logical, but you'd be amazed ...)

If you're inclined to use email shorthand (u, 2, b4, LOL, *et cetera*), only do so in emails to really dear and close friends, and/or if you're between the ages of seven and seventeen.

Same goes for excessive use emoticons, though a smiley :-)) often helps soften a message where the content may be a bit uncomfortable.

Assuming you Know Your Audience and have ascertained they speak a relatively fluent version of Email-ese, and are American, use friendlier salutations and closings (such as *hi* and *have a great day!*) than you would use in formal letters.

Do not request receipts for delivery of emails. Why would you? If something is so important, call the person or send them certified mail.

Do not forward or BCC emails to people unless you really have a professionally legitimate reason to do so. It could come back to haunt you, diminish your reputation as a trustworthy and straight person, and cause unnecessary embarrassment.

Never run an executable (.EXE) file from an email attachment ... and immediately purchase virus protection software (if you don't already have it).

Plan ahead when you're moving jobs or changing email providers. Make sure you notify all your key contacts - personal, corporate and commerce - that you have a new email address. Try, if possible, to keep the old account active for a month or so to deal with any emailers you might have neglected to contact prior.

Don't attempt to unsubscribe from junk emails you receive. It's really a trick, wherein the sender actually identifies your email address as a legitimate active address. You get the opposite result: more junk email.

Do unsubscribe - when desired - from legitimate, requested information such as store promotion emails and informative ezines.

*Have any more miscellaneous tips
to add? Email me at
minimum_required@hotmail.com.*

Chapter 16

Multiple Email Addresses: A Common Sense Approach for Managing Your Inbox

If your inbox is clogged with emails from Who Knows Where, it's time to take action. There is no reason to suffer in silence, particularly if you're reading more of your email from a wireless, hand-held device or dial-up connection.

Here's what to do:

First, create a new primary account for important and desired emails.

Most internet providers allow multiple mailboxes, plus you can always get a free account from Hotmail, Yahoo! and other such services.

If you work for a company and are inundated with excessive and arguably irrelevant emails, request from your manager an additional account that you will only give to your key contacts in your company, customers and/or vendors. You decide. Keep your publicly known email address active, and go to that inbox *after* you've checked and responded to messages in your new primary inbox.

You can always later give someone your primary email address, but it's better if you first give them a secondary or tertiary address.

Next, create a second personal account for your second layer of interest and priorities. People who know about this email address may be –

- Friends with whom you only have occasional contact,
- Friends with a demonstrated propensity to send jokes,
- Commercial accounts which send statements – and endless marketing emails,
- Commerce activities such as airline reservation confirmation emails, and
- Ezines which you have been reading regularly and enjoy.

And, finally, create a third personal account for junk, potential junk and short-term activities. Emails to this address are never important and can go weeks without being reviewed. Examples of how you might use this address are –

- Any ezines which look interesting but you're not sure if you'll read them,
- Any commercial inquiry about a product or service. (If you ask them a specific question, you will want to check your email in a day or two to get their response; however, if they add you to their email list for various and sundry sales letters, they'll never clog up your primary inbox.),

- Any time you post on a message board, and
- Any time you are required to give your email address in order to access a website for more information.

This simple process of prioritizing which email address to use – according to your own definitions – can make email communication simpler, easier and more efficient.

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107 Words about the Author

My name is Jessie Newburn, and I am a fledgling copywriter currently developing my skills as a “charismatic copywriter,” a style where you feel the writer and are – hopefully – more interested in the product or services being offered because you identify with the writer. So I’m curious to get feedback about your experience with this publication, my style of writing and the organizational structure of the information.

If you’d like to be made aware of any other publications I’m producing, if you have feedback for me or suggestions for other mini-books, or would like to hire me as a copywriter, please contact me directly at minimum_required@hotmail.com.

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Please feel free to distribute and quote from this publication. Thank you for being my audience and enjoying the information enough to either pass it along or use it as a base for your own material.

I do request that you give credit where credit is due, mainly that you include my website (www.minimumrequired.com) and my name (Jessie Newburn) if you can work that in as well.

And, I’m sure you know this somewhere in the back of your mind: If you plagiarize my work and don’t credit me appropriately, you open yourself up to the same phenomenon. I think that concept is summed up in “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.” And though I’d love to give credit where credit is due for using that quote, I believe it is simply called “The Golden Rule.”

If you wish to know about future publications I write, please email me at minimum_required@hotmail.com

Thanks.

*How to Communicate More Graciously -
and Effectively - in an Electronic World:
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