4 Important Elements of Effective Email Writing
by Nguyen Doan Hanh Nguyen

When it comes to email writing, a common perception among students is that they already know how to form an email: subject line, greeting, message, and signature. It seems easy! Though this can be true, what they often don't know is how to form an *effective* email integrating the most important elements of email writing, which I call the 4 Cs: Consider, Clarify, Cut, and Complete. In this article I cover the 4 Cs and provide some classroom activities to help students practice them.

1. Consider

Before writing an email, students should always consider the audience and why they would want to read the email. Students can do so by answering these questions:

- Who is the audience?
- What is their role?
- How much do they know?
- What do they need to know?

Practice Activity

Answering these questions will help lead to the first language input in the class: signaling intention (e.g., requesting, informing, giving bad news, asking for clarification). Some activities for this language input could be:

- Students match different phrases with suitable intentions.
- Students rearrange different chunks of a phrase to make it meaningful.
- Students come up with different phrases to signal assigned intentions.
- Students read an email and identify which intention is missing. Then, students write an appropriate phrase into each gap.

Consider also means using positive language and writing in an affirmative way. Students should avoid using negatives, such as *not*, as fast readers might skip such words and misunderstand the email.

Practice Activity

Have students practice converting negative sentences into affirmative ones. For example:

- "The meeting will not start on time." ⇨ "The meeting will start late."
- "She doesn't have enough information to make the decision." ⇨ "She needs more information to make the decision."
- "Your order will not be delivered by May 27th." ⇨ _____

2. Clarify

Clarify means providing relevant supporting details and clear next steps.

Practice Activity

Prepare paragraphs of information, and have students break it into bite-sized chunks using tables, graphs, bullet points, and highlights.

Another important part of *clarify* is making students aware of the importance of pronouns to indicate who will do what.

Practice Activity

Have students practice changing passive sentences to active voice, using specific pronouns:

- "Advice is available from…" ⇨ "You can get advice from…"
- "The new system was developed" ⇨ "Our staff developed the new system."
- "Participants must be aware that…" ⇨ _____

Note: There are some occasions when passive voice would be more appropriate, depending on the emphasis, such as in "Our company was rated as the top customer service organization this year." Here, passive voice works because we want to emphasize "our company" rather than who is doing the rating.

3. Cut

The third C is *cut*: Be concise. Delete extraneous information, elaborate language, and long sentences. In other words, only include necessary information and use simple words and short sentences. This skill needs a lot of practice, because students tend to use their academic writing style in emails, which often makes the email too lengthy and full of jargon.

Practice Activities

Have students revise their own old emails for these activities, or find some for them on the internet. For each email, choose one of the following aspects of concision for students to focus on:

- Avoiding lengthy phrases. For example:
  - "I should be glad if you would" ⇨ "Please"
  - "In spite of the fact that" ⇨ "Despite"
- Detecting redundant words and cutting them. For example:
  - ~~advance~~ planning
  - ~~past~~ experience
  - cheap ~~price~~
  - ~~basic~~ fundamental
- Detecting and avoiding nominalization (nouns or noun phrases). Too many nominalizations make writing dull and obscure the real meaning of a sentence. For example:
  - "We ensured the motivation of staff with the introduction of the PD program." ⇨ "We motivated staff by introducing the PD program."
  - "It has come to my attention that…" ⇨ "I've noticed that…"
  - "We will conduct an investigation regarding this issue." ⇨
    _____

4. Complete

The last C is *complete*: Make sure the readers have all the information required. This is the time when students ensure that they have covered all facts required by the audience for next steps, that any argument they've made is structurally consistent and logically cohesive, and that there are no noticeable language mistakes.

Practice Activities

Again, have students use some of their old emails for this activity, or find some on the internet. Direct students to check for and fix some grammatical mistakes that are common for English language students, such as:
- those related to main verbs (e.g., subject-verb agreement, verb tense, parallel structure)
- those related to sentences (e.g., run-ons, fragments, independent clauses with two main verbs)
- singular/plural nouns
- prepositions
- punctuation

I hope that the 4 Cs, along with these suggested activities, will help you organize effective email writing activities for your English learners.

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