Communicating effectively is a fundamental building block of leadership and professional success. Electronic communication such as email and instant messaging tend to formalize the way that people correspond with each other as compared to face-to-face and telephone conversations. That being said, the basic rules of consideration and respect still hold true – even in cyberspace.

Effective communication has three components:

1. **Objective**: What do you hope to accomplish as a result of this communication?
2. **Clarity of Tone**: Have you expressed yourself in a manner that is not confusing or likely to be misinterpreted?
3. **Relationship Building**: How do you want the recipient to feel about you?

Email is a powerful tool that must be wielded carefully. Keeping the three components in mind as you draft an email will help you avoid subtle mistakes. The following are examples to help you see some subtleties of email communication.

**EXAMPLE 1 – Objective**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Miriam sends the following email to a professor to let the professor know that she will be absent from class:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hey,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will be in LA for interviews the rest of this week. I'll get the notes from my friends and come to your office hours next week to go over the material that I missed. See you next week!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the goal of Miriam’s email is to show how conscientious she is about her studies, this message is lost in the informality and presumptuousness of her email. The law school environment may seem quite informal. However, the legal profession in general is still quite formal. The tone of this email is too colloquial for communication with a professor. The same applies in a work context – consider the senior status and expectations of the recipient when drafting your message. Also, it is presumptuous to assume that a professor would be willing to rehash a lecture with you during office hours, though most are willing to make themselves available. Be sure to limit your individual review to the most difficult concepts unless the professor invites a much larger discussion.

The following message conveys a better tone:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prof. Volborth:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am afraid that I will have to miss class for the remainder of the week due to callback interviews on the west coast. I have already arranged to get notes from my classmates for the days that I will be absent. If possible, next week I could appreciate any time you might have to discuss questions that may arise as I review the material. I apologize for any inconvenience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sincerely,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**EXAMPLE 2 – Clarity**

Paul replies to an email from about a new assignment on Rule 11 sanctions. None of the other law students is available to do the assignment, which is due in two days. Paul responds as follows:

Tia,

I hated Civil Procedure, but I'll do the assignment if no one else can.

Paul

Paul’s message implies that he’s doing the partner a favor by taking on a project that he would otherwise turn down. The format and tone are also less formal than they should be. Is this the proper objective – for Paul to portray himself as a knight in shining armor? No! Paul’s objective should be to accept even an unsavory assignment as a training ground for the practice of law, which often requires performing tasks that are not ideal or desirable. The following is a more appropriate response to the request:

Ms. Barnes:

Thanks for thinking of me. I have not studied Civil Procedure since my first year, but this will be a great opportunity for me to delve deeper into the subject. Also, I would welcome the opportunity to get to know the attorneys in the Litigation practice group.

Sincerely,

Paul

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**EXAMPLE 3 – Relationship Building**

Peter responds to an attorney’s suggestion that they meet the following day to review a summary judgment motion that Peter submitted. Peter replies as follows:

"That sounds great, but I’ll be out of the office in the morning and will probably be slammed tomorrow afternoon. I’ll call you if I’m available, otherwise can we try to find a mutually convenient time next week?"

Even in a short email exchange, a greeting and closing are necessary. For anyone senior to you (in experience if not in age), use a courtesy title such as “Mr.” or “Ms.” until the person invites you to call him or her by his or her first name.

In Peter’s response there is an implication that he has more important things to do and is willing to receive feedback only if it is convenient to his schedule. In reality, both parties must of course be available for a meeting. However, Peter should recognize that by suggesting that they meet the following day, the attorney is indicating the most convenient time for her in the near future. She is investing her time to provide feedback, which for some employers is a rare occurrence. Thus, Peter should express gratitude for the attorney’s time and interest in his professional development, and respectfully indicate a time when he is available to meet on the day that she suggested. The following is a more appropriate response to the attorney’s invitation:

Ms. McAllister:

Thank you for offering to review my summary judgment motion. I welcome the feedback and the chance to improve my work while I still have a few assignments remaining this summer. Tomorrow morning I plan to attend court with Ms. Crawford to observe a motion hearing, and in the afternoon I’ll be working on a research project but I can work around your schedule.

Sincerely,

Peter
Duke students who encounter difficulty during their summer employment rarely find the cause to be the quality of their work. Interpersonal skills are critical in demonstrating that you have the good judgment to interact successfully with colleagues and clients. As email communication has become one of the most common methods of business communication, it is important that your email messages are respectful and considerate of the recipient, just as you would be in a face-to-face conversation. In closing, here are a few final tips on email etiquette:

1. Open your emails! Don’t presume from the subject line that an email does not pertain to you. Read each email that comes into your inbox, even if you only briefly scan the message before discarding it.

2. If you receive an email that requires a response, try to respond as soon as possible. Tardy replies or unread messages are considered a lack of organization on your part. If you don’t have the necessary information readily available, send a reply indicating that you are in the process of researching the answer and will provide additional information at a specific time.

3. Keep in mind that not every communication is appropriate for email. This is particularly true when delivering difficult news where your tone of voice and physical demeanor may influence how the recipient perceives your message, or explaining a complicated idea if an in-person discussion will better help your colleague to understand. Sometimes it is wise to get up from your keyboard and walk to your colleague’s desk, or pick up the telephone and call them directly.

4. When possible, submit an assignment in person. By going to the attorney’s office you will have a greater opportunity to develop a relationship as the attorney will often want to hear your thoughts on the issues addressed in the assignment. This also increases the likelihood that you will receive direct feedback on the assignment. You should follow up the meeting with an email thanking the attorney for talking with you, and attaching an electronic version of the document.

5. Assume that none of your email messages is private. An email is more akin to a postcard than a private letter.