

# CSC290 Communication Skills for Computer Scientists

Lisa Zhang

Lecture 9; November 11, 2019

# Announcement

- ▶ Critical review edits: due Nov 14th 9pm
- ▶ Tutorial this week: time for group work
- ▶ Final Presentation Slides due Nov 18th 11pm
- ▶ Repository is due Dec 4th 9pm
  - ▶ Please read the handout!

# Midterm

- ▶ Your *entire* midterm paper is available on Markus
  - ▶ From Markus homepage, click “midterm”, and then “Results”.
  - ▶ There should be a dropdown menu to the left of a “Download” button on the left side of the screen.
  - ▶ Select “midterm.pdf” to see your midterm paper plus the graders annotations.
- ▶ Solutions are on Quercus
- ▶ Multiple Choice booklets are on Quercus

Remark requests are due on Markus by Nov 16, 9pm

## Midterm Averages:

- ▶ Individual test: 68%
- ▶ Group test: 83%
- ▶ Combined: 70%

Multiple choice is graded out of 28 instead of 30

We were fairly generous in grading the short-answer questions

Emails

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## “But I already know how to write an email”

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## “But I already know how to write an email”

Raise your hand if you experienced a situation where . . .

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- ▶ you sent 3-4 emails just to schedule an appointment.
- ▶ you received an email, but have no idea why the sender sent the email to you.
- ▶ you didn't get a response for your email.

## Goal for today

- ▶ How to write effective emails that are easy to respond to
- ▶ How to effectively use email introductions for networking

# Bias

Much of what I learned about emails are from my time in a startup accelerator.

Some of the content of this lecture is obvious, but many things are not obvious (at least they weren't to me).

Investors, CEOs, and other senior people are very busy. How do you make sure your emails are seen?

# Email Pros & Cons

## Advantage:

- ▶ Easy and ubiquitous
- ▶ Inexpensive
- ▶ Scalable (share information to many people easily)

## Disadvantage:

- ▶ High volume of spam and junk mail
- ▶ Cannot read non-verbal cues
- ▶ Not secure

## Keep the audience in mind

- ▶ Are they busy people?
- ▶ Do they know you?
  - ▶ “cold” email: recipient doesn’t know you
  - ▶ “warm” email: recipient knows you and may be expecting the email
- ▶ When will they be seeing your email?
- ▶ How often do they check email?
- ▶ Did they express their email preference to you?

## Activity

- ▶ Read email excerpts 1-3.
- ▶ What is wrong with each email?
- ▶ Work with your group

## Email questions

- ▶ Is your subject descriptive?
- ▶ Are you getting to the point in the first sentence?
- ▶ Are you ending with a call-to-action?
- ▶ Are you using paragraphs effectively?
- ▶ Do you address the reader, and have a professional signature block?
- ▶ Are you using the To/CC/BCC fields effectively? What about reply vs reply-all?



# The anatomy of an email

- ▶ To
- ▶ CC
- ▶ BCC
- ▶ Subject
- ▶ Body

What is the difference between “To”, “CC” and “BCC”?

## To, CC, vs BCC

- ▶ **TO**: the main recipient of the email
- ▶ **CC** (carbon copy): other people who may be interested in the message
- ▶ **BCC** (blind carbon copy): send a copy of the email to someone, *without* any other recipient's knowlegde.

What are appropriate uses of **BCC**?

## To, CC, vs BCC

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What are appropriate uses of **BCC**?

- ▶ Sending an email to a mailing list
  - ▶ keep all recipient's emails private
- ▶ Removing someone from a thread so they don't receive further replies
  - ▶ we'll discuss this later

## Reply vs Reply-all

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When should you *reply* vs *reply-all*?

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When should you *reply* vs *reply-all*?

- ▶ **Reply:** when there is a long list of recipients.
- ▶ **Reply-all:** to keep everyone in the loop.

# Subject

The subject should concisely describe the content of the email.

- ▶ The subject should help the recipient decide:
  - ▶ Do I need to open this email?
  - ▶ Do I need to do something?
  - ▶ Do I need to reply to this email?

## Subject-only emails

- ▶ Sometimes, people send emails with only a subject and no body.
- ▶ Succinct message, followed by “EOM” (End of Message).
- ▶ This is ok for short announcements, but *not* recommend for an email that requires a response.
- ▶ Other email acrynomns and labels
  - ▶ FYI - For Your Information
  - ▶ OOO - Out Of Office
  - ▶ Action Required
  - ▶ Urgent (use with care)



## Subject: Good or bad?

Are the subjects for Excerpts 1-3 good or bad?

How would you improve these email subjects?

## Choose a subject for this email (1)

Hi Lisa,

How long should the documentation be? The handout doesn't mention a specific word count.

Thanks,

Anonymous

## Choose a subject for this email (2)

Hello Bob,

I am a computer science student who is currently working with some of my classmates to build a computer game for a course. We were wondering whether we could use one of your songs as background music for the game. The game will be open source and publicly available on GitHub here (link), and we are not making any money. Of course, we will credit you for your work if you consent.

Please let us know if it is okay for us to use your music.

Thank you!

Alice

## Choose a subject for this email (3)

Hello,

I am a third-year ECE student and would like to apply to be a teaching assistant for the course CSC290. I submitted my TA application few days ago, and wanted just to reach out with more details about my application. . . .

Anonymous

## Getting to the point

- ▶ Business emails should be informative and brief.
- ▶ Answer the question “why are you sending an email?” in the first sentence (or two at most).

Are the first two sentences of Excerpts 1-3 good or bad?

What improvements could you make?

## End with a call-to-action

- ▶ What do you want the recipient to do after reading your email?
- ▶ Now that they are done, remind them!

Your call-to-action should be **specific**.

## Effective call-to-action

How can you use an effective call-to-action in this scenario?

- ▶ you are asking a person 3 questions in an email, and want answers to them all

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Solution:

- ▶ Write your questions as a numbered list
- ▶ Your call-to-action should be a request to answer **all** the questions



## Call-to-action to set up a Meeting

- ▶ Minimize the effort of the responder.
- ▶ “What time are you available?” is a time-consuming question to answer.
- ▶ Better:
  - ▶ Are you available Tuesday afternoon, say at 3pm?
  - ▶ I can be around next week Tuesday 2pm or Thursday any time.
- ▶ You can always ask the recipient to suggest another time.

## Email Content and Structure

- ▶ Use paragraphs and topic sentences so your email is easy to skim.
- ▶ Keep your emails brief as much as possible.
- ▶ Use lists if necessary.
- ▶ Place long “attachments” at the end.

## Example (email to TAs)

Hello,

For the blog post benchmarking, could you grade the following three blog posts? You should spend ~5 min per blog post. This includes reading the blog post, assigning grades, and writing short feedback (if necessary). The instructions are at the bottom of this email.

Please do this by Friday, or let me know if this deadline is too difficult to meet.

Lisa



(... long instructions go here ...)

# Addressing the reader

Examples:

- ▶ Dear Miss Rose
- ▶ Dear Mohammed
- ▶ Hi Emma
- ▶ Hello Joe

In long threads, people sometimes forgo greeting. But usually not in a first email unless you know the person well.

In CS, normally address people by first name.

# Signature Block

- ▶ Keep it simple.
- ▶ Some companies have common signature blocks.
- ▶ Refrain from adding quotes, cute images, anything not absolutely required.

## Other considerations:

- ▶ **Length of your email:**
  - ▶ Are you getting to the point?
  - ▶ Can you move content into an attachment?
- ▶ **Timing of your email:**
  - ▶ People go read emails reverse chronologically
- ▶ **Proper English:**
  - ▶ Are you using proper English, avoiding slang?
- ▶ **Tone of your email:**
  - ▶ Do you sound angry?

## Check the tone

It is very easy for people to misunderstand the tone of emails.

Example:

*Emma,*

*I need your report by 5 p.m. today or I'll miss my deadline.*

*Ted*

Does Ted sound angry?

## Alternative

*Hi Emma,*

*Thanks for all your hard work on that report. Could you please get your version over to me by 5 pm, so I don't miss my deadline?*

*Ted*



## Emoticons in emails (study)

Emoticons in workplace emails provide contextualized cues about how an utterance is supposed to be interpreted. They function as

1. Markers for positive attitude,
2. Markers for jokes and irony,
3. Hedges, to strengthen thanks and soften requests.

– Skovholt et al. The Communicative Functions of Emoticons in Workplace E-Mails

Acceptability of emoticons depends on your workplace.

## One Topic per Email

Write **two separate emails** for two separate issues.

## Email Introductions

# Why ask for an introduction?

- ▶ People don't respond as readily to cold emails.
- ▶ Having a mutual friend to introduce you will increase response likelihood.
- ▶ Introductions are useful for:
  - ▶ finding mentors
  - ▶ finding jobs
  - ▶ networking

## Introduction etiquette

- ▶ Ask for **specific** introductions.
- ▶ Your mutual friend might want to ask permission before doing the introduction. You can help by writing a blurb explaining who you are, and why you are interested in the introduction.
- ▶ Try to respond to the introduction quickly.
- ▶ Announce that you are moving your mutual friend to “BCC”.

## Real Introduction Email

*Hi Jane,*

*As I was saying this morning, my friend Danny is a PM at Company and looking for someone to spearhead a bunch of data science projects. You're one of the best data scientists I know so I quickly thought of you!*

*I'll let you two take it from here.*

## Another Introduction Email

- ▶ Excerpt 4 shows another example of an introduction email
- ▶ This email contains a “blurb” written by the person who is requesting an introduction
- ▶ Why write a blurb like this?

## Cold Emails



## Next “Blog Post”

Instead of a blog post, write a cold email to a potential mentor. Do not post the email to your blog post. Instead, submit the email as a PDF.

1. Identify a potential mentor, someone that can help you in some way.
  - ▶ A person working for a company you are looking to join.
  - ▶ An alumnus who is successful.
  - ▶ A graduate student working at a lab you want to join.
2. Write a professional email to ask them for specific help, and potentially set up a coffee meeting.

## Cold Email

I highly encourage you to actually send the email, to see where it takes you. You may find a job this way.

Avoid asking famous people. Find someone who is local, possibly an alumnus or someone else with a local connection. They are more likely to respond to you.

## Cold Email Example

*Hi Carrie,*

*My name is Matt. I'm currently finishing up my undergrad and I'm a data science intern at BigCo. I'm interested in hearing about your research in hopes of understanding the data cycle that goes on at your research group and potentially pinpoint an exact problem that I can help solve with my project. Would you be interested to meet for a quick chat and coffee sometime in the next week?*

*Sincerely, Matt*

## Cold Email Example (2)

*Hi Sam,*

*I'm a UTM student interested in a computer science career. In fact I'm looking for a summer internship right now, and chanced upon your profile on LinkedIn. I was very impressed with your work at ABC Co. Do you know if your company would be open to hiring summer interns?*

*Thanks, Jesse*

## People are Generally Helpful

- ▶ Not everyone will respond to cold emails like this.
- ▶ However, people in CS tend to be *very helpful*, and very open to helping newcomers.
- ▶ So **think** about how people can help you, and **ask** for help!

It's okay if some people don't respond.

# Summary

- ▶ To, CC, BCC, Reply vs Reply-all
- ▶ Writing a descriptive subject
- ▶ Get to the point in the first ~sentence
- ▶ Use paragraphs effectively
- ▶ End with a call-to-action
- ▶ Address your recipient, and have a professional signature block
- ▶ Introduction etiquette
- ▶ Writing cold email