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OUT BOX

ELEMENTS OF E-STYLE

by Nick Paumgarten

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E-mail isn't the most self-conscious medium; haste and volume encourage many correspondents to forget themselves. Still, everyone settles on a style. The lower-case non-punctuators, the serial capitalizers, the rhetorical questioners, the subpoena-anticipators, the posterity-watchers: they all have their reasons, and their conceits.

Two years ago, David Shipley, the Op-Ed editor of the *Times*, and Will Schwalbe, the editor-in-chief of Hyperion Books, were eating oysters in Grand Central Terminal and complaining about ill-considered e-mails they had recently received, and even sent. Before long, they found themselves cobbling together a system of proper usage and protocol. Now, with the publication of their book "Send: The Essential Guide to Email for Office and Home," they have put themselves forward as the genre's Strunk and White.

Shipley and Schwalbe enumerate six essential e-mail types (the Ask, the Answer, Grovelling, etc.), eight deadly sins (too casual, too vague, too illegal, etc.), and a four-step checklist (S.E.N.D.) that reflects the authors' broad-ranging e-mail conservatism. "S" stands for simple, "E" for effective, "N" for necessary, "D" for done. Generally, they'd have you hit "send" later and less often. They offer a hermeneutics of the cc, an invocation against the word "please," and a number of rather chilling but by now self-evident rules ("Never forward without permission, and assume everything you write will be forwarded"). The reader gulps at the thought of unexploded self-incriminations ticking in servers around the world. The authors, astonishingly, come out in favor of exclamation points (" 'Thanks!!!!' is way friendlier than 'Thanks' "), abbreviations ("Is LOL . . . really inherently more opaque than FYI?"), and emoticons (those smiley faces and the like may "bug many people but they make us smile").

Each author considers the other to be the best e-mailer he knows. "Talk about a great e-mailer!" Shipley wrote in an e-mail last week. "Mr. Schwalbe is too kind. He's really the best. On top of that, he always manages to refresh his Subject Lines." But they acknowledge that they are hardly perfect. Last week, for example, an attempt to reach Shipley by e-mail resulted in silence; he was on vacation in Germany, and his out-of-office autoreply had failed to deploy. Still, summoned by fax, he eventually joined an e-mail three-way, noting, nonetheless, that such an arrangement was perhaps less expedient than a conversation via instant messaging or telephone. Shipley and Schwalbe maintain that different media suit different circumstances. Condolence e-mails, for example, are insufficient on their own. Follow up with a letter. And, Shipley says, "E-mail apologies are inherently lame." The reader gulps again.

Let the record show that neither man is a proponent of the "respond in portions" approach to answering—that practice of cutting the first e-mail into bits and taking on each item in turn. "One of my problems with it is that it can so easily devolve into barked commands," Schwalbe wrote. "You start by writing interstitial comments like 'Good idea, but maybe we should . . .' and before you know it, you are writing things like 'No' or 'That won't work at all.' "

They both use "Dear ___" unfailingly. Schwalbe is an "All best!" man, whereas Shipley goes with "Cheers." They hold that you should address recipients by their last names unless invited otherwise, explicitly or implicitly (see "mirroring"), and they disdain intemperance and reprimand. As e-mailers, both men, in keeping with their positions near but not quite at the top of their respective food chains, are cordial and politic, and they were astounded by the lack of tact exhibited by Bush Administration officials in their e-mail discussions over the firing of eight "underperforming" federal prosecutors. What could they have been thinking?

"They were thinking about a lot of things, clearly, but they weren't thinking about e-mail," Shipley wrote. "Their brains stopped telling them that they were putting their words and ideas down in indelible digital ink. I can't think of anything more dangerous."

The brains of Shipley and Schwalbe—or, for that matter, of anyone who reads "Send"—will likely never be so susceptible. As the e-mails went to and fro last week, seeming occasionally even to cross each other on their trip across (or is it under?) the ocean, the correspondents' attention to indelibility seemed unwavering.

"This is fun but very meta!" Schwalbe wrote:

I realize I'm discussing something while I'm doing that very thing. You know how DVDs come with "Director's Commentary" tracks. It's like I'm recording one of those tracks WHILE directing instead of after!

Again, so many thanks!!!

All best!

Will ♦