Connect!

As popular as websites, blogs, social networking sites and podcasts are, email remains the most widely used web-based or Internet-based application in the world. Think about it. You can send and receive email to just about anybody (one research group estimated in 2006 that there were 1.1 billion email users), from just about anywhere (do you know where Tuvaluan is?) using a variety of devices (computers and cellphones and handhelds, oh my!). But just because someone can send an email doesn't mean that they know how to use it effectively to communicate with others. A number of CareerForward™ activities will require your students to correspond with people outside of your classroom, so you'll need to know how to guide your students' email communications so they can get the right points across to their recipients.

Two Kinds of Email Messages

There are two types of email that are generally written. The first kind is written when making initial contact with the recipient. Let's say your students want to set up appointments with local business people to interview for a project and they choose to contact these folks via email. This would be an example of a "first contact" email message that would need to clearly explain the purpose of the email and then make a request of the recipient. The second kind of email is written in response to, or regarding, earlier email messages that were sent. The nature of this kind of email is quite different than the first because you're now responding to various aspects of the original or subsequent messages, where both people have to try their best to understand what the other is talking about and responding appropriately. Let's take a look at some good practices for writing both types of email.

No one likes to read email that reads like last night's C-SPAN transcript, right? (Unless, of course, it's supposed to be a C-SPAN transcript). Effective email messages reflect the following principles:

- Clarity
- Simplicity
- Brevity
- Humanity[1]

The idea of clarity speaks to knowing what the purpose of your message is and making it clear. This not only helps to communicate to your recipient what you're trying to

Connect! aligns with the following Michigan Merit Curriculum Guidelines for an Online Learning Experience:

- Use of Technology Tools
- Educator, Expert and Student Involvement
- Sustained Learning

[1]Zinsser, William. On Writing Well, 30th anniversary edition. HarperCollins, 2006.

accomplish with your message, but it can also help guide you as you choose the words you use to craft your message. If your students know that the purpose of their email is to "gain an interview with a person for the purposes of a project," this will help steer them away from talking about the fact that they desperately need an "A" in this class to get their driver's license.

Simplicity speaks to the mnemonic KISS (Keep It Simple Student). Using just the right words to say exactly what you mean will allow your recipient to clearly and easily understand your message the first time around. Because let's face it, after reading 10 email messages and then coming across a message that reads like a real estate contract is quite taxing on the mind.

Brevity speaks to the adage of "less is more." Again, the example of a C-SPAN transcript illustrates how some people try to make their point with so much information that the message gets lost. Of course there are times when more information is needed to fully explain your message, but if you know what the goal of your message is and spend the time to edit toward that goal, you will not only be effective in getting your message across, but your recipient will appreciate the short and sweet approach of your message.

And speaking of your recipient, writing with them in mind is where humanity comes into play. You want to communicate with your recipient so they not only know what you're communicating or asking, but you're doing so in a manner that helps you both make a connection; where some level of trust and understanding can exist, even if only in cyberspace. Your message has no meaning if no one cares to listen to it. So it's important to think about your recipient as a person and to write in that manner.

The Subject Line

We must not forget the importance and significance of a well-thought-out subject line. If you think about it, the subject line of an email is the "message before the message" because that's what you see first before you open up (or throw away) an email. But many of us do not pay close attention to writing this very important part of the email because we always assume that since it's coming from "us," that of course it will be read and responded to with the utmost consideration!

The best approach to take in writing an effective subject line is to go back and revisit the goal of your message, then think of a few key words or a short phrase that represents the goal of the message. For our interview scenario, good subject lines could read like the following:

• "Interested in Conducting an Interview"
• "High School Career Interview Project"

Poor examples that might end up in the trash or spam folder include:

• "Hi"
• "I have a question for you"
• "I need help"

A well-composed subject line will gain the attention of your recipient and also prepare them for your well-composed email message.

Staying Connected

So you have the perfect email message composed and sent off to your recipient:

Dear Mr. Google,

My name is Sam Smith and I am a 9th grader at East High School. Our class is currently working on a career exploration and planning module and one of our assignments is to interview a local business person to ask how they got started in their job. I have read a few articles about you in the local newspaper and am very interested in how you came to be the richest person in town.

I would like to know if you would have an hour, sometime during the next 2 weeks, for me to conduct an interview with you. I will have a number of questions prepared and would be happy to present them ahead of time.

Thank you for taking the time to read my email and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Sam Smith

And you wait and wait until you finally get a reply!

Dear Sam,

Thanks for your message. Sounds great! Let me know the details.

Thanks, Guy Google

What sounds great? Didn't I already give him some details? Is he agreeing to do the interview? How does one respond to this kind of response? The simplest way to reply is to first acknowledge that you've read the reply, restate the parts that you don't understand, ask for clarification and then follow up with your request again.

Dear Mr. Google,

Thank you for your reply. When you said "sounds great!" I did not understand if you were commenting on the project or agreeing to my request for an interview. I hope that it was that you were agreeing to the interview!

If you are agreeing to an interview, can you tell me which days and times would work best for your schedule?

Sincerely, Sam

The better you are at addressing specific portions of the message that you need clarification on, the better chance that both of you will understand what was said, what was meant and what was agreed upon.

Don't Beat a Dead Horse

If after three or so email exchanges you find that you and your recipient aren't quite on the same wavelength, stop communicating via email and change your approach if possible. Call the person on the telephone or perhaps meet face-to-face to clarify the messages. It's surprising how quickly a misunderstanding can get resolved in less than a minute over the phone or in a quick conversation! The point is to not get stuck using only email to communicate if you find that it's not working!

Sample Connect! Activities in CareerForward

Module 2 — Resources — "Understanding Career Changes"

Think about a person in your community who you don't know and would like to interview about their career. In addition to conducting the interview itself, you will be required to send an email to your potential interviewee indicating your interest in conducting an interview.

Lesson Preparation

Although this is an extension of the activity itself, and might appear simple in your students' eyes, you have to make it clear that the way they present themselves in this email will have significant impact on how they and their request are received by the potential interviewee. You will need to determine how you want your students to present themselves, how you, as the teacher, will communicate with the interviewee and how you will monitor the communications between your student and the interviewee. Making this activity a safe activity is part of the planning!

Teaching the Lesson

1. After describing the activity to your students, have them come up with a list of at least five people who they would be interested in interviewing.
2. To help them determine who to interview, have your students conduct research online to see if they can find out some background information on these people (see Collect!). Have them whittle down their list to at least three people who they wish to contact.
3. Have your students begin drafting their email requests while teaching them about the points of Clarity, Simplicity, Brevity and Humanity. They should then email or print out their draft for you to review.
4. After coming up with the final email message, have your student email their potential interviewee and send a copy to you.
5. As responses come in, be sure you are provided copies of all exchanges so you can both monitor the exchanges and assist your student with any challenges in communicating with their interviewee.
6. Follow-up with their interviewee so that they know your students and their assignment are legitimate.

Other Connect! Activities in CareerForward

Module 2 — Resources

- "How do you make money in the digital world?"

Module 3 — Resources

- "Building my social network"

Modulel 4 — Activities

- Activity 1

Notes