



## Email Killers

### Teachers' Notes

**Age:** Adults.

**Level:** Intermediate – Advanced.

**Time:** Approx. 60 minutes.

**Objective:** To expand email language and find better alternatives for regularly used email phrases.

**Key skills:** Writing (emails), speaking, BELF.

**Materials:** One copy of Worksheet 1 for the class (cut-outs to be prepared before the lesson); and one copy of Worksheet 2 for each student.

This lesson gets students thinking enthusiastically about the kind of language that they see and use in their emails. It is ideal for a class of 5-9 students working together around one big desk, although the lesson is easily adapted for 1:1s (with the student playing against the teacher) as well as for classes of larger numbers (where separate groups work together with separate sets of cards).

It is important to remember that the expressions given here are not wrong, but for various reasons they can lead to misunderstanding or even cause offence to the reader.

#### Procedure:

1. Tell students that they are going to expand the language they already know and use when writing emails. Get them to brainstorm the typical email expressions that they often see/use. Write these on the board.
2. Check that all students understand the meanings of the expressions on the board and where in an email they appear (i.e. beginning, middle or end).
3. Place the cut out cards from Worksheet 1, upside down on the desk in front of the students. Tell the students that each card contains a typical email expression that can damage or even kill your reputation - i.e. they are confusing and can easily lead to misunderstanding. Explain that some of these expressions are probably already on the board.
4. Divide the class into teams of twos or threes. Give them a few minutes to discuss how the expressions on the board could be misinterpreted.
5. Tell the teams that they will take it in turns to reveal a phrase by turning over a card. When they do so, they should suggest what is wrong with the expression on that card, and try to offer a better alternative. If a team can explain what's wrong (see key) the team wins the card. Tell students to make a note of the alternatives that are suggested.
6. When all cards have been overturned, the team with the most cards wins the game.
7. At the end of the game hand out Worksheet 2. Tell students to enter their notes in the table on that sheet. Refer students to the expressions that were written on the board at the beginning of the lesson and now consider any expressions which were not on the cards – are they also killer expressions or do they make better alternatives?
8. Encourage students to continue adding to worksheet in their own time, by recording the expressions they see in future emails.



## Email Killers

### Key:

The key to a successful email is to make it sound as natural and close to everyday speech as possible. Some of the phrases given here come from the more formal language of business letters, and by using them in emails the writer can come across as vague, sarcastic or even snooty and leave the recipient feeling as if he/she has been spoken down to.

**To whom it may concern:** *What do you do when an envelope addressed like this arrives through your letterbox? Chances are it'll go straight in the bin! The same is true for emails. When the reader sees this heading in an email he/she will stop right there and press delete. Try to be more specific when addressing the person or department you are writing to (e.g. 'To the Sales Manager' or 'To the board'). With this personal touch your emails have a better chance of being read.*

**Dear Sir or Madam:** *Do a bit of detective work and find out the name of the person you are writing to. If you're really stuck write the job title of the recipient - although it may not be the best solution to write 'Dear Personnel Director', by doing so you will give your email more familiarity as well as avoid any hint of sexual prejudice (i.e. writing only to sirs, or putting the sir before the madam). Madam is an antiquated word and using it today suggests a sarcastic tone (i.e. 'She's a proper little madam!')*

**In regards to:** *This comes from the frequent confusion between 'regard' (the correct word for this phrase) and regards (as in 'give my regards to...'). Avoid the phrase and just use a simple 'about'?*

**Please be advised:** *How would it sound if before you gave someone a piece of spoken information or advice, you began with this phrase? It reminds me of an uppity museum curator telling someone not to touch the exhibits. The phrase belongs to the kind of letter that a bank manager might send to the customer to say that his/her account is overdrawn.*

**I trust that:** *Much too formal and almost in the same league as the royal 'we'. Just by saying the phrase I feel a burning need to wag a finger in the direction of the recipient. 'I believe' or 'I understand' are much friendlier.*

**Please find attached:** *This phrase is a good example of the email cliché. It's impersonal and looks like an add-on phrase taken from a customer support template. The word 'find' can also be ambiguous – meaning both to consider and to locate.*

**ASAP:** *A popular little expression that begs misinterpretation. In a Northern European culture it will often be considered rude as it is too direct, almost like 'do it now!' but in a Southern European culture, where even 'tomorrow' refers to some time in the distant future, the word 'soon' can mean anything from next week to next month! Don't be afraid to give a deadline.*

**Thank you in advance for your help:** *In speaking we never thank someone for something before they've done it and the same is true in emails. It's presumptuous! While the writer may mean well, it could build resentment in the reader who feels that he/she is already expected to do whatever the writer asks. Use a 'please' and save the thanks for later.*

**Please do not hesitate to contact me:** *The biggest email cliché of all! The phrase has as much meaning as a shop assistant telling you to 'have a nice day!' It's also a good sentence to use if you want the reader to feel that you've got more important things to do and can't be bothered to write more.*

**Yours sincerely:** *You're not usually sincere but on this occasion you've decided to be - exclusively for the reader! The expression is a clear giveaway that you come from an age before emails (when a formal business letter was standard) and it guarantees an impersonal, formal air between the sender and reader.*

**Worksheet 1.**

**Yours sincerely,**

**Please do not hesitate  
to contact me.**

**To whom it may  
concern**

**ASAP  
(As soon as possible)**

**Dear Sir or Madam,  
(Dear Sirs,)**

**Thank you in advance  
for your help.**

**In regards to...**

**I trust that...**

**Please find attached...**

**Please be advised...**



## Worksheet 2.

### Alternatives

To Whom It May Concern,	
Dear Sir or Madam, (Dear Sirs)	
In regards to...	
Please be advised...	
I trust that...	
Please find attached...	
ASAP (As soon as possible)	
Thank you in advance for your help.	
Please do not hesitate to contact me.	
Yours sincerely,	