

## Email Messages

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# The LOL Guide to Content and Format Challenges

September 2005

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## Message Content

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**Rule No. 1: Never treat your readers as second class citizens, treat them with respect and they will act accordingly**

Let's start with a very simple question.....do you want your email message to be seen as professional or as "back yard" and amateur (or worse still, spam)?

Any List Owner, in their right mind, would only have one answer to this question; professional. Still, you would be surprised how many of the basic mistakes such as spelling and grammar plus confusing or irrelevant statements slip through the proof reading stage and enter a customer or a subscriber's inbox. Mistakes make you look bad, simple fact!

**The short term result;** your message is guaranteed to go straight to the deleted box inside 20 seconds.

**The mid term result;** the reader (maybe subconsciously) becomes cautious when recognizing your "from signature" next time

**The long term result;** if it happens more than twice, your message again ends up in the delete box and worse still, the reader goes straight to the unsubscribe button to be lost to cyberspace forever

Take time...and time out! Take the time to edit your email message or ad before you send it out. Don't just skim over it. Make yourself read every word -- and not just once. Go over it two or three times to check for problems.

**If you're not a good writer, have the message checked over by someone who is -- a partner, co-worker, friend or spouse.**

### Sleep on it

One good practice is to set the message aside and "sleep on it". I usually consider the completed message a draft only, knowing that tomorrow will bring tweaking and fine tuning.

If you are able to wait a day or two -- or even just an hour or two if that's all you have -- you'll be able to get a little distance from it and look at it more objectively.

### Common Problems

- Misspelled words -- It's essential to spell-check a document, but it's not enough. A spell checker won't catch every error so have a dictionary beside you
- Wrong word used -- This is why a spell checker isn't enough. A spell checker will only flag words it doesn't recognize. It can't tell if a legitimate word is used incorrectly. Some words commonly confused: accept, except; your, you're; then, than; there, their, they're; cite, site, sight; lay, lie; loose, loosen, lose. Also, look out for a missing "r" in the word "your."

- Grammar error -- Again, if you know you're not a good writer, have someone else check your writing for grammatical errors. Mistakes make you look bad.
- Punctuation error -- This is another area where you'll benefit from a review by someone who knows their stuff. If you're determined to do it yourself, purchase a good grammar or style book. One of the most common punctuation problems: Too many stupid commas!
- Vague or confusing statement -- Make sure every sentence is crystal-clear. You don't want your promotional message to raise more questions than it answers.
- Illogical statement -- Read over what you have written slowly. At the end of each paragraph, ask yourself: "Did that make sense?" Rewrite it so that it does.

**If you're convinced that you just can't provide well-written marketing copy on your own, it's best to hire a copywriter.**

It's worth it to pay the writer's fee if that person can make you look good -- and help you get a better response from your marketing message.

## Message Formatting

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**When composing an email marketing message...beware. What you see on your screen may not be what the recipient will see on his or her screen. Here's how to keep from looking like an idiot.**

Any one of four factors can cause problems:

- word wrap
- font
- automated formatting
- HTML tags

### Word Wrap

You might be composing your email marketing message in a word processor or text editor, or in a window of your own email program, such as Eudora, Outlook or Netscape Mail.

However, you can't be sure what program the recipient is using. People easily could be reading your message on a dozen different systems, all of which have their own funny little ways of displaying messages.

Most email clients will automatically wrap lines at a set number of characters.

If the lines in your original message are longer than allowed by the recipient's email client, your message will end up like this:

You will write a compelling, beautifully composed marketing message, but because your lines are too long, the recipient's email program will cut them off and create annoying "orphans." Your message will be hard to read, and you will look like an idiot!

**Solution:** To wrap your own lines at some reasonable length, perhaps 60 or 65 characters and place a hard return at the end of each line.

## Fonts

You might be composing your message in the default font for your word processor or mail program. But you need to realize that the recipient's email client may be using a different display font. As a result, what they see on their screen can be much different from what you see on yours.

For the purpose of this discussion, fonts come in two flavors: proportional and fixed-pitch. With a fixed-pitch font, such as Courier, every character has the same width. With a proportional font, such as Times New Roman, the width of characters can vary. So a sentence typed in Courier will usually come out longer than one typed in Times New Roman.

This can cause a problem if you are relying on characters to create effects such as lines. Your line may come out too short or too long, depending on the difference between your composition font and the recipient's display font.

Font width can also cause problems if you need characters to line up a certain way -- for example if you're creating a table.

Suppose you have created a nicely arranged table such as this one in a fixed font:

```
-----  
| Item  Color  Price |  
| ----  ----  ---- |  
| Shirt Blue  $24.95 |  
| Socks Black $ 9.95 |  
| Hat   Red   $14.95 |  
-----
```

Unfortunately, the table will come out jumbled if someone looks at it in a proportional font:

```
-----  
| Item Color Price |  
| ----  ----  ---- |  
| Shirt Blue $24.95 |  
| |  
| Socks Black $ 9.95 |  
| |  
| Hat Red $14.95 |  
-----
```

**Solution:** This is a problem that's hard to work around. The best solution is to keep things as simple as possible, and look at your message in both proportional and fixed fonts to see if any serious problems come up. Generally, you're safest if you compose in a fixed font.

## Automated Formatting and HTML Tags

A message composed in a word processing program will contain numerous hidden formatting codes, which can show up in odd ways if you merely paste the message into an email window and send it. For example, you can end up with an annoying "=20" at the end of each line.

Likewise, if you try to send out your message in HTML, many recipients will see all the HTML tags, making the message hard to read. If you're going to send HTML email, make sure that all your recipients are able to receive HTML-formatted email, or that you have technology that can deliver the right format to the right user.

Generally speaking, you are safer if you send all email marketing messages in plain text. To produce a plain-text message, compose it in a program that creates pure text, such as Notepad. Microsoft Word does not create pure text documents, even if you "Save As ..." text.

**Solution:** **If you want to use Word or another word processor to create a text document, first save the document in text, then close it and open it in Notepad (or other text editor). Now save it again in Notepad. Notepad will now save a pure text document, with no formatting. Close the document and re-open it in Notepad. You will now have a pure text document to send out. Paste this into your email window or Web form to send it out.**

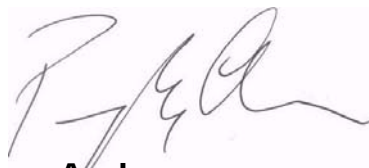
**In summary**, to avoid formatting problems, take these precautions when creating email messages:

- Create and send documents in plain text
- Limit your lines to 60-65 characters, including spaces, with a hard return at the end of each line
- Compose in a fixed-pitch font
- When creating tables or other graphics, stick to simple designs that will perform properly in any font
- View your message with both proportional and fixed pitch fonts to identify any formatting problems
- Avoid HTML email unless you can be absolutely sure all recipients will receive the right format

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This Guide is one of a series produced by SmartDames for the purpose of educating and guiding you through the tangled internet web of Email Marketing. We are happy for you to include it in your own promotional material, as long as an active link back to <http://www.listownerlimbo.com> is given. Please respect our ethics.

**Thank you**



**Penny Archer**

**List Owner** *Limbo*

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