

## Blog Title: Did I Get Your Attention?

Does anyone else dread opening Outlook some days? I recently took a writing class which has inspired me to share some advice. One of the best topics of the class was about subject lines and titles. In this world of massive inboxes and floods of messages, it is very important that we quickly grab the attention of our readers. It is also very important that when we do get their attention, we don't confuse them with misleading information.

I often get messages that were forwarded to me as part of an email string. Many times I find myself confused when the subject of the original message has nothing to do with the current topic of the conversation. The message was "hijacked" and may even include background details that I need to know, but it has changed significantly and the subject line did not change along with the message. Because of ineffective subject lines, how many people ignore a long string of messages once they have determined that earlier messages don't involve them, only to miss out when the messages do (raises her hand)? The confusion gets worse when I save messages for future reference, then can't find what I'm looking for because the subject line is not on topic.

It is important that every message we send lets our readers know what we want them to *do* or *know* and if there are *deadlines* involved. To be fair to our readers, we need to signal what kind of message they are reading, a summary of what they need to do/know and deadlines/dates right up front. Many times our subject line is all they will read when scanning through a flood of messages, so its importance *can't be overstated*. Keeping the subject line relevant is equally important to getting our message read during the cycle of replies.

One of my new "best friends" is the writing style guide that I got in the class. I think everyone could benefit from having their own guide on hand. We may not think of ourselves primarily as writers. I think the size of our inboxes would indicate that all of us are. The [FranklinCovey Style Guide: For Business and Technical Communication](#) is just one of the many good options out there. I especially appreciate its advice specific to using and managing email effectively. Another very popular guide is *The Chicago Manual of Style* and it even has an [online version](#). Because most of our writing is done for VA audiences, I'd also recommend everyone bookmark the [OIA Writing Style Guide](#), which includes information specific to our primary audiences.

In summary, remember to grab the attention of your readers with the purpose, do/know, deadline/date of your subject lines. Help your readers manage the information you provide them and we will all be more effective communicators.

--Paula Sageser (OIA Communications Team)