How to Guide: E-Mail Basics

E-mail is a wonderful tool for communicating. You can communicate with literally anyone in the world that has an e-mail address. E-mail is simply a way of exchanging messages over the internet or other computer networks such as smart phones. It works much like a traditional letter in an envelope. E-mails may include text or attachments such as photos, videos, or audio files.

The following information discusses basic concepts of e-mail and features that practically all e-mail programs possess.

Advantages of E-Mail

One of the key advantages of e-mail is its accessibility. You can send and receive e-mails from any device that has internet connectivity, including computers, tablets, and smartphones. Unlike traditional mail, sending an e-mail doesn't incur any cost per message. This makes e-mail a cost-effective communication tool. E-mail can be sent at any time, making it ideal for communication across different time zones. Moreover, e-mail is delivered nearly instantly, which is significantly faster than traditional mail.

All the Same; Just Different

All e-mail programs have the same basic features, but they use different keystrokes, icons, or words. They all perform the same functions. They just use slightly different methods. For example, to create a new e-mail message, some programs use a Write Mail icon, others a Send Mail, another a New Message, or even a Compose icon. You must determine exactly how to perform the features in your particular e-mail program.

E-Mail Addresses

All e-mail addresses have the general format: username@server. For example, the e-mail address johng@ext.msstate.edu. Johng is the username. Ext.msstate.edu is the e-mail server. An e-mail server is the computer that receives and sends e-mail; which contains my mailbox. A server is like a post office. It handles and transmits the e-mail all over the world and acts as your mailbox.

E-mail addresses are not case-sensitive. You may use all upper case, all lower case, or mixed case when entering the address. For example, JOHNG@EXT.MSSTATE.EDU, johng@ext.msstate.edu, JOHNG@ext.msstate.edu, and JoHnG@ExT.MsStAtE.EdU are all the same address.

NEVER PUT A SPACE IN AN E-MAIL ADDRESS.

Multiple Address

You can enter multiple addresses in the To: field of an e-mail program by separating the addresses with a comma. For example, entering johng@ext.msstate.edu, johndoe@yahoo.com, janedoe@AOL.com would send the e-mail message to three different persons. This is a real advantage when you want to send the same e-mail to multiple people, such as everyone in your family.

Disposable Addresses

You should always have one permanent e-mail address for your personal use. However, it is a good idea to have other addresses that you can use for things such as social media (Facebook, YouTube, etc.), your financial information, and for things like online shopping. This way, if one address is compromised, all your information will not be open to corruption. Also, you won't receive a lot of junk mail in your personal mailbox. There are situations where most of the mail in the mailbox is junk mail that must be deleted before you can find the good e-mail you want.

Consider creating some secondary, i.e. disposable e-mail accounts to use for various sites.

Sending Mail

All e-mail programs allow you to **Send** mail. Most programs automatically make a copy of all mail that is sent. This mail is usually sent in a **Sent Mail folder**. Some programs allow you to set an option to make a copy of sent mail or not.

Attachments

An attachment is something like a photo or video that cannot be viewed in a regular e-mail. An attachment might be a document that needs to be signed and sent back to the sender. Anything that is not regular text might be sent to you as an attachment.

You might have gone on a family vacation and when you get home decide to send pictures to all the family. A good way to do that is through e-mail with attachments. You can send one e-mail to all the family with a set of photos attached. Learn to use the attachment feature of your e-mail program.

Unfortunately, attachments can contain viruses or other malware (programs that do bad things to your computer). Before you view any attachment, you should scan it with your anti-virus program to see if it contains any bad stuff. Usually you can right-click the attachment and select **Scan** from the drop-down list of choices. If there are no viruses or malware in the attachment, open it. You can then save the attachment to your device if you want to keep a copy of it.

Receive, Reply, and Forward

Every program allows you to **Receive** e-mail. Most often your mail is found in an **Inbox**. Click on a message in the Inbox and you can read it. After reading it you can delete it, reply to it, forward it, or store it in a folder.

When you **Reply** to an e-mail, the message goes back to the person that sent it. Some programs have an option commonly called **Reply All**. In this option, the reply goes back to the person that sent it and to all the people that received it. For example, an e-mail is sent to you and three other people, choosing **Reply** would send mail only to sender; choosing Reply All would send mail to sender and the other three persons to whom the e-mail was addressed.

Choosing **Forward** allows you to send a copy of the e-mail message to another person or persons. Most programs allow you to edit the original message. Some will not allow you to edit the original message, it is attached to your forwarded message. All programs allow you to add information to the original message. For example, if you received a message with a question that should be answered by someone, you would forward it to that person and add a message telling him/her that this message would best be answered by him/her.

Deleting Mail

All programs allow you to **Delete** a message. It can be deleted once it has been read or even before it has been read. Deleting messages allows you to keep your Inbox clean and makes it easy to find important e-mails you have kept. Learn to delete messages after you have read them.

Most programs, by default, put the deleted messages in a **Trash folder**. You could then retrieve the message if you accidentally deleted it. Most programs keep this deleted mail until it is manually deleted. Some delete it after a certain length of time. Many programs allow you to set an option to not keep deleted messages or to automatically delete these messages once you exit the program. You could go back and retrieve the deleted message if you had not exited the program.

Folders

If you need to keep a copy of a message, you would store the information in a **Folder**. Practically all e-mail programs allow you to create folders and keep messages in them. Learn how to use folders to manage mail you want to keep.

Making Folders allows you to organize the messages you want to keep. For example, you might make a Family folder to keep all those messages you want to keep from them. Or maybe you are working on a project with several people, and you need to keep all your e-mail correspondence where you can find it. Creating a folder for the project and keeping the messages there makes it a lot easier to find your information.

You can reply or forward messages stored in a folder, just like you would one from the Inbox.

Address Books

Most programs allow you to create an **Address Book**. This allows you to easily address messages from the book simply by clicking on the correct name. Many programs also allow you to set special names for addresses (usually called aliases). For example, you might enter your father's e-mail address and set an alias named Daddy. Then when you address the e-mail, you can simply enter Daddy and the program will substitute your father's address when the message is sent. The address books also allow you to quickly send a message to multiple people by clicking on multiple addresses.

Mailing Groups or Lists

In the Address Book, you can usually create **Mailing Groups** or **Mail Lists**. For example, you might have an e-mail address for your father, mother, brother, and sister. You could great a mailing group called Family that contained all these addresses. Then by addressing the message to the group Family, it would be sent to all the addresses in the group. If you often send a message to a group of people, learning to use groups or lists will save a lot of time and trouble.

Signatures

When you send an e-mail, you should always add your name, title, postal address, phone number, and full-email address at the end of the message. However, most of us don't do that. Most programs allow you to create a signature that is automatically added to the end of each message sent. This is an easy way to add the information to a message. Learn to create and use a signature.

Other Features

E-mail programs can contain many other features. However, the features listed above are available in almost all e-mail programs. Learning to use them will greatly enhance your e-mail efforts.

E-Mail Security

Here are a few ideas to keep you safe when using your e-mail:

- Have a strong password.
- Always beware of spam and phishing. Spam is unwanted or junk e-mail. Phishing is e-mail that tries to get your personal information.
- Do not share sensitive or personal information over e-mail. Sensitive information such as passwords, your social security number, or financial data should never be sent by e-mail.
- Always scan attachments for viruses and malware, i.e., harmful programs.
- Never click on a link in an e-mail.
- Use disposable addresses, i.e., addresses that do not matter if they are compromised.

Some things you can do to keep you safe in e-mail include:

- Never open an e-mail from an unknown sender. If you do not recognize the address of the sender, just delete the e-mail without opening it.
- Delete questionable e-mails before opening them. If an e-mail looks like it might be spam or a phishing attempt, just delete it without ever opening it.
- Do not click on a link in an e-mail. Clicking on a link in an e-mail can send you to an unsafe site that may gather information from your computer. If you think the site is legitimate, copy the link and paste it into your Internet browser program.
- Always scan an attachment before opening it. Attachments of all types (photos, videos, programs, etc.) can contain viruses or other malware. Opening the attachment allows the virus or other malware to attack your computer. Scanning the attachment will check to see if it contains viruses or malware. You should always be running anti-virus software that will let you scan attachments.

E-mail is a great tool for communicating with many people quickly and easily. Learning to use all the features of your e-mail program will pay big dividends.