

## ||| DILEMMAS

# Sealing e-mails with a kiss? Only if you mean it



**SUSAN PINKER**  
PROBLEM SOLVING

## Dear Susan:

Some of my business contacts have become friends whom I now gladly meet every few months for dinner or drinks. Two of them have started to sign their e-mails with personal signatures, such as "warmly" or "fondly" -- once even with "xox." The first time I saw this, I was surprised but now I'm used to it and I kind of enjoy it. Should I respond the same way?

-- Yours Truly

## Dear Yours Truly,

How warm and fuzzy should we be when signing e-mails, especially when they're business related?

Letting the other party dictate the level of formality -- called mirroring -- is sensible but it has its pitfalls.

In his recent book, *Through the Children's Gate*, New Yorker writer, Adam Gopnik relates a story in which he mirrors a signoff that his 10-year-old son had used when instant messaging -- LOL. Mr. Gopnik uses the acronym to sign messages of support to his sister, who's in the midst of a divorce. He uses it when writing to his editors and to a friend, whose book had received terrible reviews. After six months of liberally sprinkling his e-mails with LOL, he writes to his son from an airport with an emotional goodbye message, and signs it, as usual, LOL. Luke responds: "Dad: what exactly do you think LOL means?" "Lots of Love,

obviously," the senior Gopnik replies. "NO DAD! LOL MEANS 'LAUGHING OUT LOUD'!!!"

By mirroring, Mr. Gopnik was unwittingly sending out derisive, jeering messages when he thought he was sending lots of love.

When a seasoned writer gets bamboozled by the cool factor of a novel medium there's a lesson for us all. Choose words -- or acronyms -- that express what you mean. If "fondly" reflects your relationship, then by all means, tap out "fondly." Let mine be the lone voice whispering in the emoticon wilderness that does not decry e-mail as an emotionally bankrupt medium.

Like all modes of communication, broadband is neither good nor bad in itself. It's neutral, like the alphabet or the mike in your cellphone. E-mail just transmits your message and does it quickly, so there can be the illusion of intimacy. But like other forms of writing, your message should be faithful to your intentions. Would you write "fondly" or "warmly" at the bottom of a letter? Or would you write "best wishes?" Don't use the medium as the primary guide. Use the background and history you share with your correspondent to determine how you sign off.

That said, there are a few caveats (beyond getting to know what instant messaging acronyms really mean). The first is to ask yourself whether you have anything to hide. Harry Stonecipher, the former CEO of Boeing, was ousted after someone hacked into his e-mail to expose an affair he was having with another Boeing executive. E-mail wasn't the problem. Mr. Stonecipher had been hired back from retirement to clean up the company's tarnished

image. One of his first coups was to establish a code of conduct for all employees. Alas, he violated the code himself by having the affair. E-mail was just the murder weapon. But it could just as easily have been a cellphone, as it was with Prince Charles, when that medium was used to broadcast his affection for Camilla Parker Bowles to the world.

Another caveat is to consider the context. In face-to-face communication, we can look the person in the eye, we hear the tone of voice and can read their body language. Whatever was said a moment ago still hangs in the air. These immediate cues are obvious to most people. They're ephemeral, we process them dynamically and our speech reflects that -- responding not just to content, but mimicking the style and accent of the person we're talking to and overlapping with what was just said. Conversation flows -- or it should. In e-mail, the context is not immediate but sequential. Discrete entries in a stale exchange can be recalled with a single click.

"That's why you have to choose your words carefully" says Judith Kallos, a Mississippi-based engineer who consults business people about their online image and maintains a website, [netmanners.com](http://netmanners.com). She became an e-mail etiquette maven because "intelligent business people e-mailed me like they never made it out of sixth grade."

The moral? It's an old fashioned one that dates back to the quill. Make sure what you write reflects exactly what you're thinking. With apologies to Marshall McLuhan, revered Canadian icon of my youth: The medium is not the message. The message is the message.

**Dear Susan:**

I have been with the same small company for three years and have received three bonuses in the past. They are always without notice and a pleasant surprise when they arrive. About two months ago, my boss informed me that a recently completed project was quite profitable and there would probably be a "nice bonus" in it for me. Naturally, my expectations were raised and after two months and no sign of the nice bonus, I feel deeply disappointed. Is it appropriate for me to

talk to my boss about it or are my feelings justified? Should I start looking for a new employer?

-- Hangdog

**Dear Hangdog,**

Your boss made the mistake of announcing her good intentions before she was ready to deliver and naturally you feel confused. Still, quitting your job over this would be akin to my daughter looking for a new mother because I haven't delivered on my two-month-old promise to buy her a Globe and Mail subscription. Unless it's tied to your performance in your contract, a

bonus is a gift. Questioning the amount, the timing or the motivation is ungracious. Instead of reminding her that she owes you, try putting yourself in her shoes. Are you her only employee? Are there deadlines looming? If she has time and you haven't just had your annual review, ask if she'll meet with you to give you some feedback. Do not mention the bonus. Ask how your performance can be improved. This is not sucking up. Your boss has more to do than think about your bonus. Don't you?

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.  
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