

Ethical Guidelines for Electronic Communication

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Methods of rapid inter-person and intra-group communication have expanded greatly over the past two decades. The telephone, inter-office paper memo, and postal letter forms of communication are now essentially anachronistic. Today, the text, email, and listserv have taken the place of these older methods of professional communication.

The confounding variable associated with the newer forms of communication is time. Letters and memos often required a number of iterations and proofreads prior to sending. This extended time frame permitted reflection, amendment, and correction. Even the telephone, with its direct voice to voice communication, permitted opportunity for negotiation, compromise, and discussion. Today's instantaneous one-way communication facilitates the spontaneous use of words, phrases, and emotionality and thus is fraught with interpersonal, professional, and legal downsides.

The aim of this article is to provide the reader with guidelines for the professional use of texting, email, and listserv postings. Though these methods of communication are fraught with danger, they are here to stay. One of the key caveats to all three of these communication modes has been said many times but remains resolutely true: the content of texts, emails, and listserv communications can never disappear; there is always some record of the communication available on someone's computer, on a server, or through subpoena. Below are a few common guidelines for all electronic communication followed by specific rules for email, listserv postings, and texting.

Common Guidelines for All Electronic Communication

- Be concise and proofread the text to make sure there are no grammatical or spelling mistakes.
- Avoid writing in capital letters. Capital letters MAKE IT SEEM LIKE YOU ARE SHOUTING.
- Always review the distribution list prior to sending.
- Some email systems permit the user to select a delay of up to 10 seconds for the communication to send. This delay permits canceling the communication prior to sending if second thoughts arise.
- Choose the correct wording and writing style based upon the intention of the electronic communication: professional or personal.
- Never read or send electronic communication when driving.

Email Guidelines

Physical therapists are healthcare providers and are considered primary care practitioners. They are educated at the doctoral level and a certain level of professionalism is expected with the title of Doctor of Physical Therapy. This professionalism extends beyond daily face to face interactions and includes conversations via email. Email in the workplace is a relatively secure, rapid paced method of communication. Being such, the same wording and formatting used for a text message should not be applied to the email. The workplace email should contain a proper tone with formal greetings and salutations, as well as, appropriate syntax, spelling, and grammar. The following are tips towards achieving professional email etiquette:

- Keep emails short. One to two paragraphs are often sufficient. Emails are not purposed to be position papers or extended narratives (they are better included in an attachment).
- Avoid common texting jargon and emojis/emoticons such as “LOL”, “ROFL” and “☺”.
- Include a clear, direct subject line such as “Clinical question” or “Suggestions for marketing” or “Request for meeting”.
- Always address the email in a formal manner. Examples include: “Dear Mr. Jones” or “Dear Ms. Smith” or: “Dr. Patel”. Avoid informal phrasing such as: “Hey” and “What’s up”.
- Extra caution needs to be in place in order for protected health information (PHI) or data to be transmitted in any form. Know your organization's specific policies for sending any patient information or data via email.
- Begin the email with a short welcome/introductory sentence such as “I hope all is well with you and your family.” Or, “I hope you are enjoying this beautiful fall weather.”
- Follow the welcome/introductory sentence with a brief description of the aim of the email. As an example: “I have attached my biomechanics assignment to this email” or, “I am emailing to remind you that I will not be able to attend our Department meeting scheduled for tomorrow, December 14 due to a scheduling conflict.”
- Reply to every email so the sender is aware the message was received. As an example: Dear John. I received your email with the proposal this morning. Thank you.”
- End the email with a wrap-up sentence such as: “Thank you for permitting my absence” or, “If I can be of further assistance please let me know.”
- Close emails with a salutation: “Thank you,” or “Kindest regards,”.
- If the intended recipient of the email is a business or academic partner, end the email with your signature block. If the recipient is a friend or colleague sign with your first name.
- In either case, below your name, should be your professional title, address, telephone number, and email address. These can be permanently forwarded in the signature block and programmed to be included at the end of every email.
- Carefully consider the appropriateness of using “Reply All” or just “Reply”.
- Never “forward” an email unless there is presumed understanding from the original sender that the email may be forwarded to a third party.
- If necessary, protect privacy of recipients by using the blind carbon copy (bcc) field.
- Avoid adding names to the distribution list who are not eminently affected or impacted by the content of the email. Avoid adding names to the distribution list to “inform” on the behavior of a colleague.

Listserv Etiquette

A listserv is defined as an application that distributes messages to subscribers on an electronic mailing list. Typically, the aim of the listerv is to communicate content to persons with a common aim (such as learning about acute care physical therapy). Often referred to as “netiquette” Listserv etiquette are informal rules and procedure directed toward users of Listserv mailing lists to provide simple guidelines to facilitate electronic communication. Below are a number of common “netiquette” rules.

- After joining a listserv and prior to posting, become familiar with the features, settings, options and other capabilities of the e-mail/listserv client system.
- When responding to a listserv prompt or when posting a comment, include a subject line. Listserv posts without a subject line may be considered by the server as spam.
- Since most members post to listservs via their professional email, the signature block- which often includes contact information including place of employment- appears on the posting. Though this is still being debated in the courts, your comments, if posted with your place of employment, may be considered to represent your employer's opinion. Posting without a signature block is recommended.
- Do remember that when posting to a listserv you are not replying to the writer of a specific post but to an entire community. Hundreds of persons or more may read your posting.
- Do not use listservs for the solicitation, promotion, or sales of commercial products or services.
- Professional listservs should not be used to promote or engage in political activities as it is often a violation of 501(c) status.
- Listservs should not be used as personal blogs. There are many free online sites that are designed specifically for posting random thoughts and ideas and offering others the opportunity to follow those postings. Listservs, on the other hand, are intended for distributing topic-related information that the list members as a group might benefit from sharing.
- If you use an auto-responder while on vacation without setting up your subscription options, your 'out of office' messages may bounce back to LISTSERV and be broadcast to all members.

Texting Etiquette

Texting is most effective as a form of brief communication and should not be used for long discourses or discussion.

- Texting is the most informal mode of electronic communication. Texts are inappropriate to represent your business or organization or to relay important family news (unless everyone has agreed in advance that texting, in this one specific case, is appropriate). Call or e-mail instead.
- Think of texts as preludes or follow-ups to conversation, not the conversation itself. Keep them short. More than 160 characters means that a phone call or e-mail is the better way to deliver your message.
- It is super easy for your tone to be misunderstood in a text, even more so than in an e-mail. That is why texts are best left for mundane messages like, "I'm home safely!" or, "See you at 8:00 PM at your house."
- Do not use text lingo and shorthand unless you are positive the recipient is fluent in the constantly emerging language of texting.
- Do not leave them guessing. If the recipient likely does not have your cell phone number stored in their phone, make sure to let them know who you are before composing the rest of your text. For example: "Hi, Everly! This is Sarah (Kim's mom from school)...".
- Do not send texts (or e-mails that go to smart phones) after bedtime. If the recipient forgot to turn their phone to silent before turning in for the night they may be awakened by a text alert beep.
- Be aware—not everyone has unlimited texting as part of their service plan.

- Texting should never be used to transmit confidential information such as patient or student data.
- Spell all words to eliminate confusion.
- Text alerts should be non-audio. Use vibration if you want alerts. Your phone's incessant beeping may bother those around you.
- Do not text to inform someone of sad news. Deliver the news in person or by phone.
- Be careful when choosing a recipient from your phone book; a slip of the finger could send the text to a wrong recipient.
- Acknowledge the receiving of a text by texting back or with a phone call.
- If you receive a text by mistake, respond to the sender with "Sorry, wrong number."
- Do not read texts or send texts in meetings.
- Do not text anything confidential, private, or potentially embarrassing.
- Do not be upset if your text does not get an immediate response—you cannot know for sure when the recipient will read the message.

By following these simple rules, electronic communication, when used properly, can be an effective, time-saving, and instantaneous method of communication with minimal risk of misunderstanding, ethical and legal concerns, and miscalculation.

Suggested Readings

1. Code of Ethics for the Physical Therapist
<https://www.apta.org/siteassets/pdfs/policies/codeofethicshods06-20-28-25.pdf> (last accessed October 21, 2021)
2. Standards of Ethical Conduct for the Physical Therapist Assistant
<https://www.apta.org/apta-and-you/leadership-and-governance/policies/standards-of-ethical-conduct-for-the-physical-therapist-assistant> (last accessed October 21, 2021)
3. Ennis-O'Connor, M., & Mannion, R. (2020, May). Social media networks and leadership ethics in healthcare. In *Healthcare management forum* (Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 145-148). Sage CA: Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.
4. Ferlito, B., & Mametja, S. (2021). Social media for healthcare professionals: new ethical guidelines. *Current Allergy & Clinical Immunology*, 34(1), 6-9.
5. Golder, S., Ahmed, S., Norman, G., & Booth, A. (2017). Attitudes toward the ethics of research using social media: a systematic review. *Journal of medical internet research*, 19(6), e7082.