

THIS GUIDE IS TO BE READ IN CONJUNCTION WITH QUICK GUIDE TO REQUESTING INFORMATION

Pedagogical Advantages

Understanding the need and having the repertoire to communicate differently depending on the circumstances, audience and purpose is a vital competency for undergraduate students regardless of the discipline they are studying. The competencies required to request information in a professional engineering context can also be applied to any learning situation where questions need to be asked or support needs to be requested.

Inappropriate, underdeveloped or lack of communication skills are cited as important factors in poor and ineffective work practices for early career engineers. It is therefore important to develop a repertoire of communication styles to suit a range of contexts, audiences and requirements.

By developing and practicing the skills and knowledge required to write concise, focussed and professional emails requesting information students will add to their repertoire of essential communication competencies.

Assessment

Requesting information competencies are best assessed through the application of the skill i.e. sending requests for information.

Note that the Assessment is both a learning activity and a means of evaluating progress and performance. Marking can be limited to confirming whether language, form, tone and focus meet industry expectations. Teaching time can then be used to design robust design task that also assess technical knowledge and competencies, and to provide informal feedback on drafts.

Assessment loadings should reflect time students are expected to take to draft and edit.

The Indicative Assessment is best suited to individual work, however this task can additionally or alternatively be undertaken by a project team whereby members request and respond to each other's RFIs.

Indicative Assessment

Within the specified project; request information, by email, about availability, specifications or fitness for purpose of relevant equipment, materials or tools.

Sample instructions

Draft a Request for Information email to a manufacturer, supplier or technical expert.

The request must relate to equipment, materials or tools you plan to use for your project.

Include a copy of the RFI email and the response received in your project documentation. Ensure the email is concise, focussed and professional.

Implementation

Requesting information within an undergraduate learning environment may be practiced within the context of a project. However, it may occur in industry at any time. Over the duration of their degree program students may have multiple opportunities to practice, but explicitly teaching the necessary competencies should occur at the earliest occasion on which there is an expectation that students will undertake this task.

In addition to providing instruction on how to draft appropriate Request for Information (RFI) emails, students should receive feedback that allows them to edit and re-draft their own work. Developing the competencies associated with the RFI process may be integrated with development of other written communication skills.

The formal assessment of RFI emails should emphasise the clarity and conciseness of expression, the professionalism of the language used and the relevance of the focus of the request.

Early practice drafting RFI emails may be undertaken as a collaborative activity, allowing students to learn from each other as well as the teacher. It is recommended that students practice writing RFIs for different audiences including at least the project client, a manufacturer or supplier, and a technical expert.

Although the focus of this resource is requesting information, some practice responding to RFIs may also be useful, as would discussion of what to do if initial requests are not, or not adequately, responded to.

Students issuing and responding to RFI's within a group will need a framework for submitting the RFIs for assessment and feedback from the educator.

Indicative Rubric (Request for Information process)

	<i>Not Satisfactory</i>	<i>Satisfactory</i>	<i>Very Good - meets Satisfactory criteria plus...</i>
Subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Subject line is unrelated to request. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Subject line clearly summarises the request. <input type="checkbox"/> Allows for traceability of email 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Subject line attention grabbing
Addressing and Distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Sent to irrelevant / inappropriate recipients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Sent only to relevant recipients <input type="checkbox"/> Appropriate name of recipient(s) is given <input type="checkbox"/> If sending to a general contact or not sure if recipient is the correct person to respond, request to be referred to the correct person / department 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Pre-email phone call to establish correct recipient(s) if unsure
Establish Contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Recipient cannot identify who is making the request 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Introduce yourself briefly if unknown to recipient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Your authority to request information is stated
Request	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Details of the request are unclear or confusing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Clearly states what is being requested <input type="checkbox"/> Contextual details, such as measurement in what units, under what conditions, using what tools or equipment; how many, how much; model/part numbers, year of manufacture <input type="checkbox"/> Include realistic expected timeframe for response <input type="checkbox"/> Include what alternative information is useful if primary request is not able to be met 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Details given precisely (all relevant details but not too much, expressed in just enough words) <input type="checkbox"/> When, how, to whom and in what form to respond clearly and explicitly stated <input type="checkbox"/> What to do if request unable to be met clearly and explicitly stated
Writing Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Language used is overly familiar or disrespectful / impolite <input type="checkbox"/> Terminology / nomenclature is inconsistent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Language used is respectful and easily understood by the recipient <input type="checkbox"/> Tone, language and structure in line with industry expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Content written with all readers, not just primary recipient in mind

Frequently asked questions

1. How much guidance should be given to students upfront?

As there is no set format or template broadly used by industry students would benefit from being exposed to a broad range of examples. These examples can then be 'deconstructed' and analysed to develop useful guides. The focus needs to be on concise, clear and professionally expressed detailed requests. While the focus in this resource is an email format, other formats can also be considered.

2. Does this make a difference to students?

The ability to express thoughts concisely and clearly, make decisions about what is and isn't relevant and ask for help when needed are essential for both practising engineers and students. The practice of doing so in an educational setting with guidance help to develop the interpersonal and communications skills needed to work collaboratively and cooperatively with others (Association for Project Management). These capabilities are also needed to be effective lifelong learners professionals (Biggs & Tang 2007).

Further Reading & References:

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