

**Dealing with Abusive Emails**  
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When email gets confusing or downright abusive, the advice is to stop using email. Do not reply. After an appropriate cooling off period, see if you can reach the person by phone or walk down to his or her office. (Face to face is better than phone.) The tone will change immediately once this person has to look you in the eye. As chair, you should be ready to be patient yet firm, but calm and unattached. You should have a plan for what you are going to say and how you are going to say it, such as

"I could tell that email was not the best way for us to solve this problem, so I thought I would stop by."

"I can see that we have a misunderstanding and hope we might be able to talk about it."

Let them talk, but then you must end the conversation by noting that in the future, you expect communication to stay positive and respectful, and that while you are there to help, and open to hearing what people have to say, you will not allow for any further abusive communication--that this is not acceptable. I often also remind people, too, that you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar; in other words, if you are verbally abusive to me, you are less likely to get what you want! Common sense? Yes, but... email has a way of inducing off-the-cuff angry replies, in part because it is stripped of the face-to-face component and thus allows a person to get away with saying what he or she would not say in person.

Finally, a parting word that your door is always open and that in the future, if this person has another issue that is similarly complicated, to please call or stop by, again noting that email is not the best medium for these type topics. Then, raise this topic as the very first item at the next faculty meeting and have an open discussion about the kind of respectful communication environment that a department needs in order to be successful. Make sure you do not single out this particular person but make sure he or she is at the faculty meeting. Ask others to share their thoughts on this. Bring up the point that email is not always the best tool especially when a person is angry.

If it happens again, then you need to write a letter (on letterhead, not email!) stating that this behavior is not acceptable and perhaps recommend a meeting with your college's HR director.

**Rules of the road**

- Email is written, not spoken
  - Use professional tone and style
  - Remember that digital texts persist
- Do not send work email in the evenings
- If it's longer than one screen, wait to send
- If it involves complex or personal concerns, try a meeting or phone call first
- Do not send huge attachments
- Do not blanket every list you can think of
- Develop an ethic of thoughtfulness and care with email communication (do not be taken in by the dark side!)